Cover Essays from the BPS Newsletter

Bhikkhu Bodhi

1998-2005

Contents

1 A New Undertaking 1

2 Two Faces of the Dhamma 3

3 Vision and Routine 5

4 Purification of Mind 7

5 The Case for Study 9

6 Dhamma Without Rebirth? 11

7 Taking Stock of Oneself 13

8 The Balanced Way 15

9 A Look at the Kalama Sutta 17

10 A Statement of Conscience 19

11 The Vital Link 21

12 A Remedy for Despair 23

13 The Problem of Conflict 25

14 The Quest for Meaning 27

15 The Search for Security 29

16 Self-transformation 31

17 A Note on Openness 33

18 Laying Down the Rod 35

19 An Auspicious Month 37

20 The Nobility of the Truths 39

21 Refuge in the Buddha 41

22 The Five Spiritual Faculties 43

23 The Guardians of the World 45

24 Tolerance and Diversity 47

25 From Views to Vision 51

26 Association with the Wise 53

27 Dhamma and Non-duality 55

28 For the Welfare of Many **59**

29 Toward a Threshold of Understanding **61**

30 Meeting the Divine Messengers **65**

31 Walking Even Amidst the Uneven **67**

32 Message for a Globalized World **69**

33 Aims of Buddhist Education **71**

34 A Discipline of Sobriety **73**

35 Subrahma's Problem **75**

36 Giving Dignity to Life **77**

37 Lifestyles and Spiritual Progress **79**

38 A Tribute to Two Monks **81**

39 Better Than a Hundred Years **83**

40 Two Paths to Knowledge **85**

41 Anicca Vata Sankhara **87**

42 Navigating the New Millennium **89**

43 Two Styles of Insight Meditation **91**

44 Does Rebirth Make Sense? **93**

License **97**

Chapter 1

A New Undertaking

This year has been a time for the BPS to initiate new undertakings. Having outgrown our home of the last twenty years, we recently moved into spacious new quarters equipped with the larger facilities our expanding work requires. Another new undertaking inspired by our growth is the issuing of this newsletter, to accompany each of our future mailings. The newsletter gives expression to our wish to establish closer contact with you — our members, readers and friends. In these columns we will be providing you with information concerning our activities and publications, as well as book reviews, news notices and short Buddhist essays.

Perhaps we can best begin this regular essay column by exploring the purpose which guides our work at the BPS today. Put quite simply, that purpose is to offer to the world the teaching of the Buddha as set forth in the oldest collection of Buddhist scriptures, the Pali canon. However, we do not aim merely at providing objective factual accounts of the Buddha's teachings of interest solely to Oriental scholars and their students. Our purpose, we candidly admit, is advocative and prescriptive: we are convinced that the Dhamma communicates a message which is still very much alive and relevant, and through our publications we seek to make that message widely known.

In line with this aim it is essential for us that the Dhamma be addressed not only to its original and primary task of indicating the timeless path to deliverance, but also to those vexing existential problems posed by the particular circumstances of our age. Prominent among these is the widespread moral and spiritual deterioration evident in so many spheres of human life. For increasing numbers of people both East and West, cynicism, skepticism and a narrow fixation on material goals have toppled traditional views and values without offering any satisfactory alternatives to replace them. Thus, while our sciences unlock the most obscure secrets of nature and yield its powers to our control, we find ourselves beset with a sense of inner poverty, destitute of those fundamental guiding principles which can give a deeper and richer meaning to our lives.

At the root of our current spiritual disorder lies a distorted conception of value which locates the ultimate end of human activity in the satisfaction of personal desire. Tacitly accepted and adhered to without reflective awareness, this thesis has become the dominant working basis for contemporary civilization. Mobilizing individuals, ethnic groups and nations alike, it draws them into an enervating chase after the achievement of power, wealth and pleasure, and pits them against one another in a struggle for supremacy marked either by cool suspicion or by vehement hate. Given a creed of self-fulfillment in an age of declining moral vigor, it is not astonishing that in the midst of plenty we witness all around us a frantic search for instant gratification and a rising tide of destructiveness unconstrained by even the least human sympathy.

To remedy this disturbing situation, moralistic preaching will not suffice, nor can much be expected from economic, social and political reforms isolated from more fundamental changes. For at its core our crisis is a crisis of consciousness. Its real origins go deeper than our institutions, deeper than our cultural norms, deeper than our avowed motives and goals. Its origins lie in the hidden strata of the mind, in the breeding place of those tumultuous emotional and volitional forces which the Buddha summed up in the three "roots of evil" — greed, hatred and delusion.

What is most crucial, therefore, if there is to be any change in the direction of the world, is a change in those who make up the world, that is, in ourselves. To achieve our own genuine welfare and effectively promote the welfare of others, we require the acumen to distinguish clearly what is truly in our interest and what may be immediately pleasurable but ultimately harmful; and we require too the stamina to undertake the work of liberating our minds from the bonds of greed, hatred and delusion. Admittedly, the number of those who will see the need for inward change and make the appropriate effort will always be small. However, the difficulty does not annul the necessity. For those of clear vision who are responsive to the call of the good there can be no choice but to take up the long hard task of self-transformation.

If the work of inner cultivation is to come to full fruition, it must begin with and be guided by correct understanding, by that discernment of the true nature of existence which is called in the language of the Dhamma "right view." The unfailing pointer which the Buddha has provided for right view is the teaching

of the Four Noble Truths. It is this perspective of the Four Noble Truths, with the light it sheds on the perplexing relationship between desire, happiness and suffering, which may be the most important contribution the Dhamma can make toward dispelling the rampant confusion of our time. In contrast to the whole world, which stands on the assumption that happiness is to be achieved through the satisfaction of desire, the Buddha teaches that the entire enterprise aimed at appeasing desire is doomed to futility, that the pursuit of desire leads not to happiness but to suffering. In the teaching of the Enlightened One the way to genuine and unshakable happiness lies in the restraint and mastery of desire. It is only by training ourselves to resist the lure of pleasure and power, to abandon the quest for self-aggrandizement, and to relinquish our hold on our attachments, that we can find for ourselves the indestructible peace of deliverance. And it is only thus that we can act with true compassion for the benefit of others, for the good, welfare and happiness of the world.

Chapter 2

Two Faces of the Dhamma

On first encounter Buddhism confronts us as a paradox. Intellectually, it appears a freethinker's delight: sober, realistic, undogmatic, almost scientific in its outlook and method. But if we come into contact with the living Dhamma from within, we soon discover that it has another side which seems the antithesis of all our rationalistic presuppositions. We still don't meet rigid creeds or random speculation, but we do come upon religious ideals of renunciation, contemplation and devotion; a body of doctrines dealing with matters transcending sense perception and thought; and — perhaps most disconcerting — a program of training in which faith figures as a cardinal virtue, doubt as a hindrance, barrier and fetter.

When we try to determine our own relationship with the Dhamma, eventually we find ourselves challenged to make sense out of its two seemingly irreconcilable faces: the empiricist face turned to the world, telling us to investigate and verify things for ourselves, and the religious face turned to the Beyond, advising us to dispel our doubts and place trust in the Teacher and his Teaching.

One way we can resolve this dilemma is by accepting only one face of the Dhamma as authentic and rejecting the other as spurious or superfluous. Thus, with traditional Buddhist pietism, we can embrace the religious side of faith and devotion, but shy off from the hard-headed world-view and the task of critical inquiry; or, with modern Buddhist apologetics, we can extol the Dhamma's empiricism and resemblance to science, but stumble embarrassingly over the religious side. Yet reflection on what a genuine Buddhist spirituality truly requires, makes it clear that both faces of the Dhamma are equally authentic and that both must be taken into account. If we fail to do so, not only do we risk adopting a lopsided view of the teaching, but our own involvement with the Dhamma is likely to be hampered by partiality and conflicting attitudes.

The problem remains, however, of bringing together the two faces of the Dhamma without sidling into self-contradiction. The key, we suggest, to achieving this reconciliation, and thus to securing the internal consistency of our own perspective and practice, lies in considering two fundamental points: first, the guiding *purpose* of the Dhamma; and second, the *strategy* it employs to achieve that purpose. The *purpose* is the attainment of deliverance from suffering. The Dhamma does not aim at providing us with factual information about the world, and thus, despite a compatibility with science, its goals and concerns are necessarily different from those of the latter. Primarily and essentially, the Dhamma is a path to spiritual emancipation, to liberation from the round of repeated birth, death and suffering. Offered to us as the irreplaceable means of deliverance, the Dhamma does not seek mere intellectual assent, but commands a response that is bound to be fully religious. It addresses us at the bedrock of our being, and there it awakens the faith, devotion and commitment appropriate when the final goal of our existence is at stake.

But for Buddhism faith and devotion are only spurs which impel us to enter and persevere along the path; by themselves they cannot ensure deliverance. The primary cause of bondage and suffering, the Buddha teaches, is ignorance regarding the true nature of existence; hence in the Buddhist *strategy* of liberation the primary instrument must be wisdom, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Investigation and critical inquiry, cool and uncommitted, constitute the first step toward wisdom, enabling us to resolve our doubts and gain a conceptual grasp of the truths upon which our deliverance depends. But doubt and questioning cannot continue indefinitely. Once we have decided that the Dhamma is to be our vehicle to spiritual freedom, we have to step on board: we must leave our hesitancy behind and enter the course of training which will lead us from faith to liberating vision.

For those who approach the Dhamma in quest of intellectual or emotional gratification, inevitably it will show two faces, and one will always remain a puzzle. But if we are prepared to approach the Dhamma on its own terms, as the way to release from suffering, there will not be two faces at all. Instead we will see what was there from the start: the single face of Dhamma which, like any other face, presents two complementary sides.

Chapter 3

Vision and Routine

All human activity can be viewed as an interplay between two contrary but equally essential factors — vision and repetitive routine. Vision is the creative element in activity, whose presence ensures that over and above the settled conditions pressing down upon us from the past we still enjoy a margin of openness to the future, a freedom to discern more meaningful ends and to discover more efficient ways to achieve them. Repetitive routine, in contrast, provides the conservative element in activity. It is the principle that accounts for the persistence of the past in the present, and that enables the successful achievements of the present to be preserved intact and faithfully transmitted to the future.

Though pulling in opposite directions — the one toward change, the other toward stability — vision and routine intermesh in a variety of ways and every course of action can be found to participate to some extent in both. For any particular action to be both meaningful and effective the attainment of a healthy balance between the two is necessary. When one factor prevails at the expense of the other, the consequences are invariably undesirable. If we are bound to a repetitive cycle of work that deprives us of our freedom to inquire and understand, we soon bog down, crippled by the chains of routine. If we are spurred to act by elevating ideals but lack the discipline to implement them, eventually we find ourselves wallowing in dreams or exhausting our energies on frivolous pursuits. It is only when accustomed routines are infused from within by vision that they become springboards to discovery rather than deadening ruts. And it is only when inspired vision gives birth to a course of repeatable actions that we can bring our ideals down from the ethereal sphere of imagination to the somber realm of fact. It took a flash of genius for Michelangelo to behold the figure of David invisible in a shapeless block of stone; but it required years of prior training, and countless blows with hammer and chisel, to work the miracle that would leave us a masterpiece of art.

These reflections concerning the relationship between vision and routine apply with equal validity to the practice of the Buddhist path. Like all other human activities, the treading of the way to the cessation of suffering requires that the intelligent grasp of new disclosures of truth be fused with the patient and stabilizing discipline of repetition. The factor of vision enters the path under the heading of right view — as the understanding of the undistorted truths concerning our existence and as the continued penetration of those same truths through deepening contemplation and reflection. The factor of repetition enters the path as the onerous task imposed by the practice itself: the need to undertake specific modes of training and to cultivate them diligently in the prescribed sequence until they yield their fruit. The course of spiritual growth along the Buddhist path might in fact be conceived as an alternating succession of stages in which, during one phase, the element of vision is dominant, during the next the element of routine. It is a flash of vision that opens our inner eye to the essential meaning of the Dhamma, gradual training that makes our insight secure, and again the urge for still more vision that propels the practice forward to its culmination in final knowledge.

Though the emphasis may alternate from phase to phase, ultimate success in the development of the path always hinges upon balancing vision with routine in such a way that each can make its maximal contribution. However, because our minds are keyed to fix upon the new and distinctive, in our practice we are prone to place a one-sided emphasis on vision at the expense of repetitive routine. Thus we are elated by expectations concerning the stages of the path far beyond our reach, while at the same time we tend to neglect the lower stages — dull and drab, but far more urgent and immediate — lying just beneath our feet. To adopt this attitude, however, is to forget the crucial fact that vision always operates upon a groundwork of previously established routine and must in turn give rise to new patterns of routine adequate to the attainment of its intended aim. Thus if we are to close the gap between ideal and actuality — between the envisaged aim of striving and the lived experience of our everyday lives — it is necessary for us to pay greater heed to the task of repetition. Every wholesome thought, every pure intention, every effort to train the mind represents a potential for growth along the Noble Eightfold Path. But to be converted from a mere potential into an active power leading to the end of suffering, the fleeting wholesome thought-formations must be repeated, fostered and cultivated, made into enduring qualities of our being. Feeble in their individuality, when their forces are consolidated by repetition

they acquire a strength that is invincible.

The key to development along the Buddhist path is repetitive routine guided by inspirational vision. It is the insight into final freedom — the peace and purity of a liberated mind — that uplifts us and impels us to overcome our limits. But it is by repetition — the methodical cultivation of wholesome practices — that we cover the distance separating us from the goal and draw ever closer to deliverance.

Chapter 4

Purification of Mind

An ancient maxim found in the *Dhammapada* sums up the practice of the Buddha's teaching in three simple guidelines to training: to abstain from all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind. These three principles form a graded sequence of steps progressing from the outward and preparatory to the inward and essential. Each step leads naturally into the one that follows it, and the culmination of the three in purification of mind makes it plain that the heart of Buddhist practice is to be found here.

Purification of mind as understood in the Buddha's teaching is the sustained endeavor to cleanse the mind of defilements, those dark unwholesome mental forces which run beneath the surface stream of consciousness vitiating our thinking, values, attitudes, and actions. The chief among the defilements are the three that the Buddha has termed the "roots of evil" — greed, hatred, and delusion — from which emerge their numerous offshoots and variants: anger and cruelty, avarice and envy, conceit and arrogance, hypocrisy and vanity, the multitude of erroneous views.

Contemporary attitudes do not look favorably upon such notions as defilement and purity, and on first encounter they may strike us as throwbacks to an outdated moralism, valid perhaps in an era when prudery and taboo were dominant, but having no claims upon us emancipated torchbearers of modernity. Admittedly, we do not all wallow in the mire of gross materialism and many among us seek our enlightenments and spiritual highs, but we want them on our own terms, and as heirs of the new freedom we believe they are to be won through an unbridled quest for experience without any special need for introspection, personal change, or self-control.

However, in the Buddha's teaching the criterion of genuine enlightenment lies precisely in purity of mind. The purpose of all insight and enlightened understanding is to liberate the mind from the defilements, and Nibbana itself, the goal of the teaching, is defined quite clearly as freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion. From the perspective of the Dhamma defilement and purity are not mere postulates of a rigid authoritarian moralism but real and solid facts essential to a correct understanding of the human situation in the world.

As facts of lived experience, defilement and purity pose a vital distinction having a crucial significance for those who seek deliverance from suffering. They represent the two points between which the path to liberation unfolds — the former its problematic and starting point, the latter its resolution and end. The defilements, the Buddha declares, lie at the bottom of all human suffering. Burning within as lust and craving, as rage and resentment, they lay to waste hearts, lives, hopes, and civilizations, and drive us blind and thirsty through the round of birth and death. The Buddha describes the defilements as bonds, fetters, hindrances, and knots; thence the path to unbonding, release, and liberation, to untying the knots, is at the same time a discipline aimed at inward cleansing.

The work of purification must be undertaken in the same place where the defilements arise, in the mind itself, and the main method the Dhamma offers for purifying the mind is meditation. Meditation, in the Buddhist training, is neither a quest for self-effusive ecstasies nor a technique of home-applied psychotherapy, but a carefully devised method of mental development — theoretically precise and practically efficient — for attaining inner purity and spiritual freedom. The principal tools of Buddhist meditation are the core wholesome mental factors of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding. But in the systematic practice of meditation, these are strengthened and yoked together in a program of self-purification which aims at extirpating the defilements root and branch so that not even the subtlest unwholesome stirrings remain.

Since all defiled states of consciousness are born from ignorance, the most deeply embedded defilement, the final and ultimate purification of mind is to be accomplished through the instrumentality of wisdom, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Wisdom, however, does not arise through chance or random good intentions, but only in a purified mind. Thus in order for wisdom to come forth and accomplish the ultimate purification through the eradication of defilements, we first have to create a space for it by developing a provisional purification of mind — a purification which, though temporary and vulnerable, is still indispensable as a foundation for the emergence of all liberative insight.

The achievement of this preparatory purification of mind begins with the challenge of self-understanding.

To eliminate defilements we must first learn to know them, to detect them at work infiltrating and dominating our everyday thoughts and lives. For countless eons we have acted on the spur of greed, hatred, and delusion, and thus the work of self-purification cannot be executed hastily, in obedience to our demand for quick results. The task requires patience, care, and persistence — and the Buddha's crystal clear instructions. For every defilement the Buddha in his compassion has given us the antidote, the method to emerge from it and vanquish it. By learning these principles and applying them properly, we can gradually wear away the most stubborn inner stains and reach the end of suffering, the "taintless liberation of the mind."

Chapter 5

The Case for Study

The recent upsurge of interest in Buddhism, both East and West, has been marked by a vigorous practical orientation and a drive to discover the peace and freedom to which the practice of Dhamma leads. This zeal for practice, however, has often been accompanied by another trait which may not be so fruitful, namely, a tendency to neglect or even belittle the methodical study of the Buddha's teachings. The arguments offered in defense of this attitude have already become familiar currency among us. It is said, for example, that study is concerned with words and concepts, not with realities; that it leads only to learning, not to wisdom; that it can change only our ideas but fails to touch us at the deeper levels of our lives. To clinch the case the testimony of the Buddha himself is enlisted, with his famous remarks that to learn much without practicing is like counting the cows of others or like carrying a raft on one's head instead of using it to cross the stream.

This contention, to be sure, has its aspect of truth, but also suffers from a one-sided emphasis which may actually thwart rather than aid our progress on the Buddhist path. It is certainly true that learning without practice is fruitless, but the other side of the issue also should be considered. Should a person gather cows if he knows nothing about how to take care of them? Should he try to cross a rough and dangerous river without knowing how to operate a raft? The Buddha himself insisted that his followers learn and transmit the Dhamma both in the letter and the spirit, but rather than appealing to traditional formulations, let us inquire ourselves into the value and function of Dhamma study.

The point at issue, it must be stressed, is not study as an academic discipline or the accumulation of a wealth of learning, but the acquisition of a sound and solid working knowledge of the basic Buddhist doctrines. Now to see why this is so essential, we must recall that the entire practice of the proper Buddhist path develops out of the act through which we enter the path — the going for refuge to the Triple Gem. If we have taken this step honestly, with correct motivation, it implies that we have acknowledged our need for spiritual guidance and have entrusted ourselves to the Buddha as our guide and to his teaching as our vehicle of guidance. By taking refuge in the Dhamma we accept not merely a technique of meditation that we can use at liberty for our own self-appointed purposes, but a profound and comprehensive teaching on the true nature of the human condition, a teaching designed to awaken in us a perception of this truth as the means for reaching the full and final end of suffering. The liberation offered by the Dhamma comes, not from simply practicing meditation in the context of our own preconceptions and desires, but from practicing upon the groundwork of the right understanding and right intentions communicated to us by the Buddha.

This cognitive character of the Buddhist path elevates doctrinal study and intellectual inquiry to a position of great importance. Though the knowledge that frees the mind from bondage emerges only from intuitive insight and not from a mass of doctrinal facts, genuine insight always develops on the basis of a preliminary conceptual grasp of the basic principles essential to right understanding, in the absence of which its growth will inevitably be obstructed. The study and systematic reflection through which we arrive at this preparatory right view necessarily involve concepts and ideas. But before we hasten to dismiss Dhamma study as being therefore only a worthless tangle of verbiage, let us consider that concepts and ideas are our indispensable tools of understanding and communication. Concepts, however, can be valid and invalid tools of understanding; ideas can be fruitful or useless, capable of bringing immense benefit or of entailing enormous harm. The object of studying the Dhamma as part of our spiritual quest is to learn to comprehend our experience correctly: to be able to distinguish the valid from the invalid, the true from the false, the wholesome from the unwholesome.

It is only by making a thorough and careful investigation that we will be in a position to reject what is detrimental to our growth and to apply ourselves with confidence to cultivating what is truly beneficial. Without having reached this preliminary conceptual clarification, without having succeeded in "straightening out our views," there can indeed be the earnest practice of Buddhist meditation techniques, but there will not be the practice of the meditation pertaining to the integral Noble Eightfold Path. And while such free-based meditation may bring its practitioners the mundane benefits of greater calm, awareness and equanimity, lacking the guidance of right view and the driving power of right motivation, it is questionable whether it can lead to

the penetrative realization of the Dhamma, or to its final goal, the complete cessation of suffering.

It is almost impossible to give a single word of counsel on the subject of study applicable to all followers of the Dhamma. Needs and interests vary so greatly from one person to another that each will have to strike the balance between study and practice that suits his or her own disposition. But without hesitation it can be said that all who earnestly endeavor to live by the Buddha's teaching will find their practice strengthened by the methodical study of his Dhamma. Such an undertaking, of course, will not be easy, but it is just through facing and surmounting the challenges we meet that our understanding will ripen and mature in the higher wisdom.

Chapter 6

Dhamma Without Rebirth?

In line with the present-day stress on the need for religious teachings to be personally relevant and directly verifiable, in certain Dhamma circles the time-honored Buddhist doctrine of rebirth has come up for severe re-examination. Although only a few contemporary Buddhist thinkers still go so far as to suggest that this doctrine be scrapped as "unscientific," another opinion has been gaining ground to the effect that whether or not rebirth itself be a fact, the *doctrine* of rebirth has no essential bearings on the practice of Dhamma and thence no claim to an assured place in the Buddhist teachings. The Dhamma, it is said, is concerned solely with the here and now, with helping us to resolve our personal hangups through increased self-awareness and inner honesty. All the rest of Buddhism we can now let go as the religious trappings of an ancient culture utterly inappropriate for the Dhamma of our technological age.

If we suspend our own predilections for the moment and instead go directly to our sources, we come upon the indisputable fact that the Buddha himself taught rebirth and taught it as a basic tenet of his teaching. Viewed in their totality, the Buddha's discourses show us that far from being a mere concession to the outlook prevalent in his time or an Asiatic cultural contrivance, the doctrine of rebirth has tremendous implications for the entire course of Dhamma practice, affecting both the aim with which the practice is taken up and the motivation with which it is followed through to completion.

The aim of the Buddhist path is liberation from suffering, and the Buddha makes it abundantly clear that the suffering from which liberation is needed is the suffering of bondage to samsara, the round of repeated birth and death. To be sure, the Dhamma does have an aspect which is directly visible and personally verifiable. By direct inspection of our own experience we can see that sorrow, tension, fear and grief always arise from our greed, aversion and ignorance, and thus can be eliminated with the removal of those defilements. The importance of this directly visible side of Dhamma practice cannot be underestimated, as it serves to confirm our confidence in the liberating efficacy of the Buddhist path. However, to downplay the doctrine of rebirth and explain the entire import of the Dhamma as the amelioration of mental suffering through enhanced self-awareness is to deprive the Dhamma of those wider perspectives from which it derives its full breadth and profundity. By doing so one seriously risks reducing it in the end to little more than a sophisticated ancient system of humanistic psychotherapy.

The Buddha himself has clearly indicated that the root problem of human existence is not simply the fact that we are vulnerable to sorrow, grief and fear, but that we tie ourselves through our egoistic clinging to a constantly self-regenerating pattern of birth, aging, sickness and death within which we undergo the more specific forms of mental affliction. He has also shown that the primary danger in the defilements is their causal role in sustaining the round of rebirths. As long as they remain unabandoned in the deep strata of the mind, they drag us through the round of becoming in which we shed a flood of tears "greater than the waters of the ocean." When these points are carefully considered, we then see that the practice of Dhamma does not aim at providing us with a comfortable reconciliation with our present personalities and our situation in the world, but at initiating a far-reaching inner transformation which will issue in our deliverance from the cycle of worldly existence in its entirety.

Admittedly, for most of us the primary motivation for entering upon the path of Dhamma has been a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction with the routine course of our unenlightened lives rather than a keen perception of the dangers in the round of rebirths. However, if we are going to follow the Dhamma through to its end and tap its full potential for conferring peace and higher wisdom, it is necessary for the motivation of our practice to mature beyond that which originally induced us to enter the path. Our underlying motivation must grow toward those essential truths disclosed to us by the Buddha and, encompassing those truths, must use them to nourish its own capacity to lead us toward the realization of the goal.

Our motivation acquires the requisite maturity by the cultivation of right view, the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, which as explained by the Buddha includes an understanding of the principles of kamma and rebirth as fundamental to the structure of our existence. Though contemplating the moment is the key to the

development of insight meditation, it would be an erroneous extreme to hold that the practice of Dhamma consists wholly in maintaining mindfulness of the present. The Buddhist path stresses the role of wisdom as the instrument of deliverance, and wisdom must comprise not only a penetration of the moment in its vertical depths, but a comprehension of the past and future horizons within which our present existence unfolds. To take full cognizance of the principle of rebirth will give us that panoramic perspective from which we can survey our lives in their broader context and total network of relationships. This will spur us on in our own pursuit of the path and will reveal the profound significance of the goal toward which our practice points, the end of the cycle of rebirths as mind's final liberation from suffering.

Chapter 7

Taking Stock of Oneself

Though in principle the Buddhist path leads straight and unerringly from bondage to freedom, when we apply it to ourselves it often seems to take a tortuous route as imposed by the twists and turns of our own contorted mental topography. Unless we have exceptionally mature wholesome roots, we cannot expect to approach the goal "as the crow flies," soaring unhindered through the quick and blissful skyways of the jhanas and higher insights. Instead we must be prepared to tread the path at ground level, moving slowly, steadily and cautiously through the winding mountain roads of our own minds. We begin at the inevitable point of departure — with the unique constellation of personal qualities, habits and potentials that we bring with us into the practice. Our ingrained defilements and obstinate delusions, as well as our hidden reserves of goodness, inner strength and wisdom — these are at once the material out of which the practice is forged, the terrain to be passed through, and the vehicle that takes us to our destination.

Confidence in the Buddhist path is a prerequisite for persisting on this journey. Yet it often happens that though we may be fully convinced of the liberating efficacy of the Dhamma, we stumble along perplexed as to how we can apply the Dhamma fruitfully to ourselves. One major step toward reaping the benefits of Dhamma practice consists in making an honest assessment of one's own character. If we are to utilize effectively the methods the Buddha has taught for overcoming the mind's defilements, we first must take stock of those particular defilements that are prevalent in our individual makeup. It will not suffice for us to sit back and console ourselves with the thought that the path leads infallibly to the end of greed, hate and delusion. For the path to be effective in our own practice, we have to become familiar with our own persistent greeds, hates and delusions as they crop up in the round of daily life. Without this honest confrontation with ourselves, all our other pursuits of Dhamma may be to no avail and can actually lead us astray. Though we may gain extensive knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures, clarify our view and sharpen our powers of thought, invest so many hours on the meditation cushion and walkway, if we do not attend to the blemishes in our characters, these other achievements, far from extricating the defilements, may instead only go to reinforce them.

Yet, though honest self-assessment is one of the most vital steps in Dhamma practice, it is also one of the most difficult. What makes it so difficult is the radically new perspective that must be adopted to undertake an investigation of oneself and the dense barriers that must be penetrated to arrive at truthful self-understanding. In attempting to assess ourselves we are no longer observing an external entity which we can treat as an adventitious object to be evaluated in terms of our subjective purposes. We are observing instead the seat of observation itself, that most elusive center from which we gaze out upon the world, and we are doing so in a mode which casts all its motives and projects in a critical light. To enter this domain of inquiry is to run smack up against our very sense of personal identity, and thus to have to pierce the thick screens of delusion and blind emotivity which keep that sense of identity intact.

Normally, in subservience to our need to confirm to ourselves our uniqueness and irreplaceable importance, we proceed to construct mental pictures — indeed, a picture gallery — of what we imagine ourselves to be. The self-image that emerges from these pictures becomes simultaneously a mainstay which we cling to in order to maintain our self-esteem and a standpoint from which we orient ourselves toward others and launch our projects in the world. To secure its tenuous status the mind employs a variety of tactics "behind the back" of our conscious awareness. It throws up blinders which keep out disturbing information, it flatters us with fantasied projections, it drives us to manipulate people and situations in ways that will seem to validate our tacit assumptions about our virtues and identity.

All these projects born of the quest to substantiate our sense of identity only increase our suffering. The more we lock ourselves into the images we form of ourselves, the more we alienate ourselves from others and close off our access to liberating truth. Thence release from suffering requires that we gradually discard our delusive self-images through rigorous examination of our minds.

The venerable Sariputta, in the Discourse on No Blemishes (MN 5), stresses the role of honest self-assessment as a prerequisite of spiritual growth. He points out that just as a dirty bronze bowl, deposited in a dusty place

and utterly neglected, only becomes dirtier and dustier, so if we fail to recognize the blemishes of our minds we will not make any effort to eliminate them, but will continue to harbor greed, hate and delusion and will die with a corrupted mind. And just as a dirty bronze bowl which is cleaned and polished will in time become bright and radiant, so if we recognize the blemishes of our minds we will arouse our energy to purify them, and having purged ourselves of blemishes we will die with an undefiled mind. The task of self-knowledge is always a difficult one, but it is only by knowing our minds that we will be able to shape them, and it is only by shaping our minds that we can liberate them.

Chapter 8

The Balanced Way

Like a bird in flight borne by its two wings, the practice of Dhamma is sustained by two contrasting qualities whose balanced development is essential to straight and steady progress. These two qualities are renunciation and compassion. As a doctrine of renunciation the Dhamma points out that the path to liberation is a personal course of training that centers on the gradual control and mastery of desire, the root cause of suffering. As a teaching of compassion the Dhamma bids us to avoid harming others, to act for their welfare, and to help realize the Buddha's own great resolve to offer the world the way to the Deathless.

Considered in isolation, renunciation and compassion have inverse logics that at times seem to point us in opposite directions. The one steers us to greater solitude aimed at personal purification, the other to increased involvement with others issuing in beneficent action. Yet, despite their differences, renunciation and compassion nurture each other in dynamic interplay throughout the practice of the path, from its elementary steps of moral discipline to its culmination in liberating wisdom. The synthesis of the two, their balanced fusion, is expressed most perfectly in the figure of the Fully Enlightened One, who is at once the embodiment of complete renunciation and of all-embracing compassion.

Both renunciation and compassion share a common root in the encounter with suffering. The one represents our response to suffering confronted in our own individual experience, the other our response to suffering witnessed in the lives of others. Our spontaneous reactions, however, are only the seeds of these higher qualities, not their substance. To acquire the capacity to sustain our practice of Dhamma, renunciation and compassion must be methodically cultivated, and this requires an ongoing process of reflection which transmutes our initial stirrings into full-fledged spiritual virtues.

The framework within which this reflection is to be exercised is the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, which thus provides the common doctrinal matrix for both renunciation and compassion. Renunciation develops out of our innate urge to avoid suffering and pain. But whereas this urge, prior to reflection, leads to an anxious withdrawal from particular situations perceived as personally threatening, reflection reveals the basic danger to lie in our existential situation itself — in being bound by ignorance and craving to a world which is inherently fearsome, deceptive and unreliable. Thence the governing motive behind the act of renunciation is the longing for spiritual freedom, coupled with the recognition that self-purification is an inward task most easily accomplished when we distance ourselves from the outer circumstances that nourish our unwholesome tendencies.

Compassion develops out of our spontaneous feelings of sympathy with others. However, as a spiritual virtue compassion cannot be equated with a sentimental effusion of emotion, nor does it necessarily imply a dictum to lose oneself in altruistic activity. Though compassion surely includes emotional empathy and often does express itself in action, it comes to full maturity only when guided by wisdom and tempered by detachment. Wisdom enables us to see beyond the adventitious misfortunes with which living beings may be temporarily afflicted to the deep and hidden dimensions of suffering inseparable from conditioned existence. As a profound and comprehensive understanding of the Four Noble Truths, wisdom discloses to us the wide range, diverse gradations, and subtle roots of the suffering to which our fellow beings are enmeshed, as well as the means to lead them to irreversible release from suffering. Thence the directives of spontaneous sympathy and mature compassion are often contradictory, and only the latter are fully trustworthy as guides to beneficent action effective in the highest degree. Though often the judicious exercise of compassion will require us to act or speak up, sometimes it may well enjoin us to retreat into silence and solitude as the course most conducive to the long-range good of others as well as of ourselves.

In our attempt to follow the Dhamma, one or the other of these twin cardinal virtues will have to be given prominence, depending on our temperament and circumstances. However, for monk and householder alike, success in developing the path requires that both receive due attention and that deficiencies in either gradually be remedied. Over time we will find that the two, though tending in different directions, eventually are mutually reinforcing. Compassion impels us toward greater renunciation, as we see how our own greed and attachment make us a danger to others. And renunciation impels us toward greater compassion, since the relinquishing

of craving enables us to exchange the narrow perspectives of the ego for the wider perspectives of a mind of boundless sympathy. Held together in this mutually strengthening tension, renunciation and compassion contribute to the wholesome balance of the Buddhist path and to the completeness of its final fruit.

Chapter 9

A Look at the Kalama Sutta

In this issue of the newsletter we have combined the feature essay with the "Sutta Study" column as we take a fresh look at an often quoted discourse of the Buddha, the Kalama Sutta. The discourse — found in translation in Wheel No. 8 — has been described as "the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry," and though the discourse certainly does counter the decrees of dogmatism and blind faith with a vigorous call for free investigation, it is problematic whether the sutta can support all the positions that have been ascribed to it. On the basis of a single passage, quoted out of context, the Buddha has been made out to be a pragmatic empiricist who dismisses all doctrine and faith, and whose Dhamma is simply a freethinker's kit to truth which invites each one to accept and reject whatever he likes.

But does the Kalama Sutta really justify such views? Or do we meet in these claims just another set of variations on that egregious old tendency to interpret the Dhamma according to whatever notions are congenial to oneself — or to those to whom one is preaching? Let us take as careful a look at the Kalama Sutta as the limited space allotted to this essay will allow, remembering that in order to understand the Buddha's utterances correctly it is essential to take account of his own intentions in making them.

The passage that has been cited so often runs as follows: "Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumor, nor upon scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon bias toward a notion pondered over, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the consideration 'The monk is our teacher.' When you yourselves know: 'These things are bad, blamable, censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them... When you yourselves know: 'These things are good, blameless, praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them."

Now this passage, like everything else spoken by the Buddha, has been stated in a specific context — with a particular audience and situation in view — and thus must be understood in relation to that context. The Kalamas, citizens of the town of Kesaputta, had been visited by religious teachers of divergent views, each of whom would propound his own doctrines and tear down the doctrines of his predecessors. This left the Kalamas perplexed, and thus when "the recluse Gotama," reputed to be an Awakened One, arrived in their township, they approached him in the hope that he might be able to dispel their confusion. From the subsequent development of the sutta, it is clear that the issues that perplexed them were the reality of rebirth and kammic retribution for good and evil deeds.

The Buddha begins by assuring the Kalamas that under such circumstances it is proper for them to doubt, an assurance which encourages free inquiry. He next speaks the passage quoted above, advising the Kalamas to abandon those things they know for themselves to be bad and to undertake those things they know for themselves to be good. This advice can be dangerous if given to those whose ethical sense is undeveloped, and we can thus assume that the Buddha regarded the Kalamas as people of refined moral sensitivity. In any case he did not leave them wholly to their own resources, but by questioning them led them to see that greed, hate and delusion, being conducive to harm and suffering for oneself and others, are to be abandoned, and their opposites, being beneficial to all, are to be developed.

The Buddha next explains that a "noble disciple, devoid of covetousness and ill will, undeluded" dwells pervading the world with boundless loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. Thus purified of hate and malice, he enjoys here and now four "solaces": If there is an afterlife and kammic result, then he will undergo a pleasant rebirth, while if there is none he still lives happily here and now; if evil results befall an evil-doer, then no evil will befall him, and if evil results do not befall an evil-doer, then he is purified anyway. With this the Kalamas express their appreciation of the Buddha's discourse and go for refuge to the Triple Gem.

Now does the Kalama Sutta suggest, as is often held, that a follower of the Buddhist path can dispense with all faith and doctrine, that he should make his own personal experience the criterion for judging the Buddha's utterances and for rejecting what cannot be squared with it? It is true the Buddha does not ask the Kalamas

to accept anything he says out of confidence in himself, but let us note one important point: the Kalamas, at the start of the discourse, were not the Buddha's disciples. They approached him merely as a counselor who might help dispel their doubts, but they did not come to him as the Tathagata, the Truth-finder, who might show them the way to spiritual progress and to final liberation.

Thus, because the Kalamas had not yet come to accept the Buddha in terms of his unique mission, as the discloser of the liberating truth, it would not have been in place for him to expound to them the Dhamma unique to his own Dispensation: such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the three characteristics, and the methods of contemplation based upon them. These teachings are specifically intended for those who have accepted the Buddha as their guide to deliverance, and in the suttas he expounds them only to those who "have gained faith in the Tathagata" and who possess the perspective necessary to grasp them and apply them. The Kalamas, however, at the start of the discourse are not yet fertile soil for him to sow the seeds of his liberating message. Still confused by the conflicting claims to which they have been exposed, they are not yet clear even about the groundwork of morality.

Nevertheless, after advising the Kalamas not to rely upon established tradition, abstract reasoning, and charismatic gurus, the Buddha proposes to them a teaching that is immediately verifiable and capable of laying a firm foundation for a life of moral discipline and mental purification. He shows that whether or not there be another life after death, a life of moral restraint and of love and compassion for all beings brings its own intrinsic rewards here and now, a happiness and sense of inward security far superior to the fragile pleasures that can be won by violating moral principles and indulging the mind's desires. For those who are not concerned to look further, who are not prepared to adopt any convictions about a future life and worlds beyond the present one, such a teaching will ensure their present welfare and their safe passage to a pleasant rebirth — provided they do not fall into the wrong view of denying an afterlife and kammic causation.

However, for those whose vision is capable of widening to encompass the broader horizons of our existence, this teaching given to the Kalamas points beyond its immediate implications to the very core of the Dhamma. For the three states brought forth for examination by the Buddha — greed, hate and delusion — are not merely grounds of wrong conduct or moral stains upon the mind. Within his teaching's own framework they are the root defilements — the primary causes of all bondage and suffering — and the entire practice of the Dhamma can be viewed as the task of eradicating these evil roots by developing to perfection their antidotes — dispassion, kindness and wisdom.

Thus the discourse to the Kalamas offers an acid test for gaining confidence in the Dhamma as a viable doctrine of deliverance. We begin with an immediately verifiable teaching whose validity can be attested by anyone with the moral integrity to follow it through to its conclusions, namely, that the defilements cause harm and suffering both personal and social, that their removal brings peace and happiness, and that the practices taught by the Buddha are effective means for achieving their removal. By putting this teaching to a personal test, with only a provisional trust in the Buddha as one's collateral, one eventually arrives at a firmer, experientially grounded confidence in the liberating and purifying power of the Dhamma. This increased confidence in the teaching brings along a deepened faith in the Buddha as teacher, and thus disposes one to accept on trust those principles he enunciates that are relevant to the quest for awakening, even when they lie beyond one's own capacity for verification. This, in fact, marks the acquisition of right view, in its preliminary role as the forerunner of the entire Noble Eightfold Path.

Partly in reaction to dogmatic religion, partly in subservience to the reigning paradigm of objective scientific knowledge, it has become fashionable to hold, by appeal to the Kalama Sutta, that the Buddha's teaching dispenses with faith and formulated doctrine and asks us to accept only what we can personally verify. This interpretation of the sutta, however, forgets that the advice the Buddha gave the Kalamas was contingent upon the understanding that they were not yet prepared to place faith in him and his doctrine; it also forgets that the sutta omits, for that very reason, all mention of right view and of the entire perspective that opens up when right view is acquired. It offers instead the most reasonable counsel on wholesome living possible when the issue of ultimate beliefs has been put into brackets.

What can be justly maintained is that those aspects of the Buddha's teaching that come within the purview of our ordinary experience can be personally confirmed within experience, and that this confirmation provides a sound basis for placing faith in those aspects of the teaching that necessarily transcend ordinary experience. Faith in the Buddha's teaching is never regarded as an end in itself nor as a sufficient guarantee of liberation, but only as the starting point for an evolving process of inner transformation that comes to fulfillment in personal insight. But in order for this insight to exercise a truly liberative function, it must unfold in the context of an accurate grasp of the essential truths concerning our situation in the world and the domain where deliverance is to be sought. These truths have been imparted to us by the Buddha out of his own profound comprehension of the human condition. To accept them in trust after careful consideration is to set foot on a journey which transforms faith into wisdom, confidence into certainty, and culminates in liberation from suffering.

Chapter 10

A Statement of Conscience

"All beings tremble at the rod" says the Buddha, yet today the ominous rod of terrorism has become one of the gravest problems that we face. No longer is the terrorist threat reserved for the vulnerable public figure or the outspoken adversary. With their lightning speed and global reach, our modern media of communication have given the terrorist cadres a tremendous new power to intimidate whole populations. Far too often the victims of their hits are the helpless and innocent, struck down in a symbolic show of hate.

This appalling increase in terrorist violence pierces the moral consciousness at its core, leaving behind painful and persisting wounds. For those of us who reside in Sri Lanka the problem becomes ever more acute as we witness the tide of terrorism sweep across this traditional homeland of the Dhamma. It is no longer possible for us to immerse ourselves in the comfortable routines of our familiar world. Instead we must struggle in anguish and hope to deal with this frightful menace in our midst — to understand it and to confront it in a manner worthy of our Buddhist heritage.

It cannot be disputed that the worldwide rise of terrorism springs from complex causes of a political, economic and social character, which must be tackled by any adequate solution to the problem. At the same time, however, we have to insist that terrorism also has a deeper underlying human dimension that can only be ignored at our peril. If we probe beneath the burning issues of political ideology and ethnic grievances around which the terrorist forces rally, we will discover at its epicenter those same malignant drives that, in less virulent form, motivate so much ordinary human conduct.

As the vital dynamism from which terrorism springs we will find *greed*, a rapacious lust for power and domination. We will find *hate*, smoldering within as cold resentment or whipped up into a frenzy of destruction. And we will find *delusion*, a collective paranoia instilled by inflammatory ideologies or the blind submergence of the individual in the group. These are the hidden human roots of terrorism; fed by personal frustration and social discontent, they yield as their fruits the violence that surrounds us.

As we grapple with the problem of terrorism, asking ourselves what we can contribute to stem its rising tide, we may find an answer closer to home than we imagine. Let us first note that the spread of terrorism is not so much a macabre deviation from prevailing norms as an extreme manifestation of a wholesale decline in human fellow feeling. This lack of empathy and sensitivity to others can already be discerned in the everyday functioning of society — in the spreading disease of corruption, apathy and selfishness infecting the social organism. Add to this a frantic search for a sense of belonging through the rediscovery of ethnic roots, and the result is a potentially very explosive mixture.

If this much is recognized, we may then see that one of the most effective counter-measures we can apply in our individual capacity against the growth of terrorism lies very much within our reach. Simply put, it consists in reaffirming to ourselves — and teaching by precept and example — those fundamental ethical values upon which a harmonious and peaceful society is founded. This reaffirmation of genuine moral values — of compassion, honesty, truthfulness, tolerance and respect for others — will sound a thunderous statement of conscience. Whether made audibly or privately to oneself, it will raise a note of protest against the moral negligence from which terrorism draws its sustenance, acclaiming our confidence in the power of the good.

While we should not cherish unrealistic expectations about our ability to reshape the world, we also should not lose sight of our responsibility to counter prevalent trends. Nor should we discount our ability to make an impact. The clear and decisive commitment to ethical values has a quiet potency that can effect important changes both outwardly and inwardly. While subtly altering the interpersonal aspects of our lives, within our hearts it will fortify those two mental factors that the Buddha called the guardians of the world — shame and moral dread — the former the innate repugnance toward evil, the latter the fear of its consequences.

Above all, we must reaffirm the need to rise above the limiting perspectives of the self-centered point of view in which so many today have become entrenched. Recognizing that every community, and the world as a whole, is ultimately harmed by the struggle of each faction to secure its individual ends, we must stand up for the development of a sense of humane responsibility that will transcend divisive loyalties. The lesson that

we must learn and teach is that embedded in the ancient maxim taught by the Buddha: "Considering others as oneself, do not hurt them or cause them harm." To recognize others as being essentially the same as oneself and to feel their wish for happiness as one's own, this is the only effective means we can propose to build the peaceful society for which we yearn.

Chapter 11

The Vital Link

At the same time that Buddhism has begun to gain a firm foothold in the West, its fate in its traditional Asian homelands has been moving, sadly, in the opposite direction, toward atrophy and decline. Already in several Asian Buddhist countries Buddhism has been forcibly suppressed, while even in those countries which have preserved their political integrity the Dhamma no longer occupies the same sovereign place in people's hearts that it held in an earlier era. Although devotional piety and a sense of Buddhist personal identity still remain strong, throughout the breadth of Buddhist Asia cultural and ideological forces of great power have been unleashed which daily challenge the hegemony of the Dhamma as the key to meaning and value for those who profess it as their refuge.

Among the changes taking place in current patterns of thinking, perhaps the most detrimental to the Dhamma has been the rise to prominence of a materialistic world view which focuses upon the present life as the only field for all human endeavor. This world view need not be assented to intellectually, with full awareness of its implications, for it to become a major determinant of our attitudes and conduct. Often a curious ambivalence prevails in our minds, where with one part of the mind we profess our confidence in the lofty principles of the Dhamma, while with the other we think and act as if the present life were the sole occasion for human happiness and the achievement of worldly success were the true mark of the accomplished individual.

The rapid spread of the materialistic world view has in turn brought about a far-ranging secularization of values that invades every nook and cranny of our lives. This transformation of values gives precedence to goals and attitudes diametrically opposed to those advocated by the Dhamma, and under its impact the scales have tipped far away even from a reasonable balance between material and spiritual goods. Now we see acquisitiveness replacing contentment as the reigning ideal, competition taking the place of cooperation, fast efficiency the place of compassionate concern, and selfish indulgence the place of abstinence and self-control.

The attempt to live simultaneously by two conflicting sets of principles — those being ushered in by secular materialism and those grounded in the Dhamma — generates a tension that contains within it a seed of very destructive potential. Often the tension is only dimly felt by those in the older generation, who accept the new outlook and values without clearly perceiving the challenge they pose to traditional Buddhist ideals. It is when the contradiction is pushed down to the next generation, to the Buddhist youth of today, that the inherent incompatibility of the two perspectives comes into the open as a clearcut choice between two alternative philosophies of life — one proposing a hierarchy of values which culminates in the spiritual and sanctions restraint and renunciation, the other holding up the indulgence and gratification of personal desire as the highest conceivable goal. Since the latter appeals to strong and deep-seated human drives, it is hardly puzzling that so many young people today have turned away from the guidance of the Dhamma to pursue the new paths to instant pleasure opened up by the consumer society or, in their frustration at missed opportunities, to take to the path of violence.

Since it is the younger generation that forms the vital link in the continuity of Buddhism, connecting its past with its future, it is of paramount importance that the Buddhist youth of today should retain their fidelity to the Dhamma. The Dhamma should be for them not merely a symbol of cultural and ethnic identity, not merely a focus point of sentimental piety, but above all a path to be taken to heart, personally applied, and adhered to in those critical choices between present expediency and long-range spiritual gain. The problem, however, is precisely how to inspire the young to look to the Dhamma as their guide and infallible refuge.

It must be stressed that our present dilemma goes far deeper than a breakdown of moral standards, and thus that it cannot be easily rectified by pious preaching and moral exhortation. If conduct deviating from the Dhamma has become widespread among today's youth, this is because the Buddhist vision has ceased to be meaningful to them, and it has ceased to be meaningful not because it has lost its relevance but because it is not being presented in ways which highlight its timeless and ever-immediate relevance.

The most urgent task facing those concerned with the preservation of Buddhism must be the attempt to communicate to the young the central vision at the heart of the Dhamma, the vision from which all the specific

doctrines and practices of Buddhism issue forth. This does not require a mastery of the technical details of the Dhamma, but it does require that we ourselves understand the Dhamma's essence and are actively striving to make that understanding the foundation of our lives. Both by precept and example we must show that true freedom is to be found not in uncontrolled license, but in the control and mastery of desire; that true happiness lies not in a proliferation of goods, but in peace and contentment; that our relations with others are most rewarding when they are governed not by conflict and competition, but by kindness and compassion; and that true security is to be achieved not by the acquisition of wealth and power, but by the conquest of self with all its ambitions and conceits.

Chapter 12

A Remedy for Despair

Most of us live in the cramped cold cages of our private projects, frantically struggling to stake out our own little comfortable place in the sun. Driven in circles by anxious yearnings and beckoning desires, we rarely ever glance aside to see how our neighbor is faring, and when we do it is usually only to assure ourselves that he is not trying to encroach upon our own domain or to find some means by which we might extend our dominion over his.

Occasionally, however, it somehow happens that we manage to detach ourselves from our obsessive pursuits long enough to arrive at a wider clearing. Here our focus of concern undergoes a remarkable shift. Lifted above our habitual fixation on myopic goals, we are brought to realize that we share our journey from birth to death with countless other beings who, like ourselves, are each intent on a quest for the good.

This realization, which often topples our egocentric notions of the good, broadens and deepens our capacity for empathy. By breaking down the walls of self-concern it allows us to experience, with a particularly inward intimacy, the desire all beings cherish to be free from harm and to find an inviolable happiness and security. Nevertheless, to the extent that this flowering of empathy is not a mere emotional effusion but is accompanied by a facility for accurate observation, it can easily turn into a chute plunging us down from our new-found freedom into a chasm of anguish and despair.

For when, with eyes unhindered by emotively tinged blinkers, we turn to contemplate the wide expanse of the world, we find ourselves gazing into a mass of suffering that is vertiginous in its volume and ghastly in its intensity. The guarantor of our complacency is the dumb thoughtless glee with which we acquiesce in our daily ration of sensual excitation and ego-enhancing kudos. Let us raise our heads a little higher and cast our eyes about, and we behold a world steeped in pain where the ills inherent in the normal life-cycle are compounded still more by the harshness of nature, the grim irony of accident, and the cruelty of human beings.

As we grope about for a handle to prevent ourselves from plummeting down into the pits of despondency, we may find the support we need in a theme taught for frequent recollection by the Buddha: "Beings are the owners of their kamma, the heirs of their kamma; they are molded, formed and upheld by their kamma, and they inherit the results of their own good and bad deeds." Often enough this reflection has been proposed as a means to help us adjust to the vicissitudes in our personal fortunes: to accept gain and loss, success and failure, pleasure and pain, with a mind that remains unperturbed. This same theme, however, can also serve a wider purpose, offering us succor when we contemplate the immeasurably greater suffering in which the multitudes of our fellow beings are embroiled.

Confronted with a world that is ridden with conflict, violence, exploitation and destruction, we feel compelled to find some way to make sense out of their evil consequences, to be able to see in calamity and devastation something more than regrettable but senseless quirks of fate. The Buddha's teaching on kamma and its fruit gives us the key to decipher the otherwise unintelligible stream of events. It instructs us to recognize in the diverse fortunes of living beings, not caprice or accident, but the operation of a principle of moral equilibrium which ensures that ultimately a perfect balance obtains between the happiness and suffering beings undergo and the ethical quality of their intentional actions.

Contemplation on the operation of kamma is not a cold and calculated expedient for justifying a stoical resignation to the status quo. The pathways of kamma are labyrinthine in their complexity, and acceptance of this causal order does not preclude a battle against human avarice, brutality and stupidity or stifle beneficent action intended to prevent unwholesome deeds from finding the opportunity to ripen. Deep reflection on kammic retribution does, however, brace us against the shocks of calamity and disappointment by opening up to our vision the stubborn unwieldiness of a world ruled by greed, hate and delusion, and the deep hidden lawfulness connecting its turbulent undercurrents with the back-and-forth swing of surface events. While on the one hand this contemplation awakens a sense of urgency, a drive to escape the repetitive round of deed and result, on the other it issues in equanimity, an unruffled inner poise founded upon a realistic grasp of our existential plight.

Genuine equanimity, which is far from callous indifference, sustains us in our journey through the rapids of

samsara. Bestowing upon us courage and endurance, it enables us to meet the fluctuations of fortune without being shaken by them, and to look into the face of the world's sufferings without being shattered by them.

Chapter 13

The Problem of Conflict

It is one of the bitterest ironies of human life that although virtually all human beings cherish a desire to live in peace, we continually find ourselves embroiled in conflict, pitted against others in relationships marred by tension, distrust or open hostility. This irony is particularly poignant because it is immediately evident to us that cordial, harmonious relations with others are a necessary condition for our own genuine happiness. Not only do such relations allow us to pursue undisturbed the goals we consider essential to our personal fulfillment, but they bring us the deeper joy of meaningful communion with our fellow human beings. Contentious living, in contrast, is always intrinsically painful, involving a hardening of our subjective armor, a tightening of the knots of anger and hate. Indeed, whatever the outcome of conflict may be — whether victory or defeat — the result itself is ultimately detrimental for both victor and victim alike.

Nevertheless, although harmonious living promises such rich blessings while discordant relations entail so much harm and misery, for the most part our lives — and the lives of those around us — are entangled in a raveled net of quarrels and disputes. Conflict may simmer within as silent suspicion and resentment or it may explode into violent rage and devastation. It may implicate us at the level of personal relationships, or as members of an ethnic group, a political party, a social class or a nation. But in one or another of its many manifestations, the presence of conflict in our lives seems inescapable. Peace and harmony hover in the distance as beautiful dreams for a summer's night or noble ideals to which we pledge formal allegiance. But when reality knocks and dreams are dispelled, we find ourselves drawn, usually against our better judgment, into an arena where the pleasures that we seek exact as their price the hard cash of struggle and contention.

The teachings of the Buddha, while framed around the goal of individual deliverance from suffering, are also expounded for the purpose of instructing us in how we can live in harmony with others. Such harmony is desirable not only as a source of satisfaction in itself, but also because it is a prerequisite for treading the path to the higher freedom. The final peace of enlightenment can arise only in a mind that is at peace with others, and the mind can only be at peace with others when we are actively committed to a course of training that enables us to extricate the roots of conflict that lie buried deep within our hearts.

Once, in ancient India, Sakka the ruler of the gods came to the Buddha and asked: "By what bonds are people bound whereby, though they wish to live in peace, without hate and hostility, they yet live in conflict, with hate and hostility." The Master replied: "It is the bonds of envy and avarice that so bind people that, though they wish to live in peace, they live in conflict, with hate and hostility." If we trace external conflicts back to their source, we will find that they originate not in wealth, position or possessions, but in the mind itself. They spring up because we envy others for the qualities they possess which we desire for ourselves, and because we are driven by an unquenchable avarice to extend the boundaries of what we can label "mine."

Envy and avarice in turn are grounded in two more fundamental psychological conditions. Envy arises because we identify things as "I," because we perpetually seek to establish a personal identity for ourselves internally and to project that identity outward for others to recognize and accept. Avarice arises because we appropriate: we attempt to carve out a territory for ourselves and to furnish that territory with possessions that will titillate our greed and sense of self-importance.

Conflict being thus rooted in envy and avarice, it follows that the path to non-conflict must be a course of relinquishment, of removing the constrictive thoughts and desires that pivot around the notions of "I" and "mine," the drives to identify and to possess. This course reaches consummation with the full maturity of wisdom, with insight into the empty, egoless nature of all phenomena; for it is this insight which exposes the hollowness of the notions of "I" and "mine" that underlie envy and avarice. However, although the final liberation from clinging may lie far away, the path leading to it is a gradual one, growing out of simpler, more basic steps that lie very close to our feet.

Two such necessary steps are changes in attitude with the power to transmute envy and avarice. One is altruistic joy (*mudita*), the ability to view the success of others with the same gladness we experience at our own success. The other is generosity (*caga*), the readiness to give and to relinquish. The former is the specific

antidote for envy, the latter the antidote for avarice. What is common to both is a lifting of the sense of identity from its narrow fixation on the self, and a broadening of it to encompass others who share our desire to be happy and free from suffering.

As private individuals we cannot hope to resolve by our will the larger patterns of conflict that engulf the societies and nations to which we belong. We live in a world that thrives on conflict, and in which the forces that nurture conflict are pervasive; obstinate and terribly powerful. But as followers of the Enlightened One what we can do and must do is to testify by our conduct to the supremacy of peace: to avoid words and actions that engender animosity, to heal divisions, to demonstrate the value of harmony and concord. The model we must emulate is that provided by the Master in his description of the true disciple: "He is one who unites the divided, who promotes friendships, enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord, and who speaks words that promote concord."

Chapter 14

The Quest for Meaning

However much the modern world may pride itself on its triumphs over the follies and foibles of the past, it appears that the progress we credit ourselves with has been bought at a price so steep as to throw into question the worth of our achievements. This price has been nothing less than the shared conviction that our lives are endowed with ultimate meaning. Though in earlier ages men and women lived in a space populated largely by figments of the collective imagination, they could still claim a precious asset that we sorely lack: a firm and buoyant belief that their everyday lives were encompassed by a penumbra of enduring significance stemming from their relation to a transcendent goal.

Present-day attitudes, however, molded by scientific reductionism and technocratic audacity, have combined forces to sweep away from our minds even the faint suspicion that our lives may possess any deeper meaning than material prosperity and technological innovation. For an increasing number of people today the consequence of this militancy has been a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. Cut loose from our moorings in a living spiritual tradition, we find ourselves adrift on a sea of confusion where all values seem arbitrary and relative. We float aimlessly along the waves of caprice, without any supreme purpose to serve as the polestar for our ideals, as the wellspring for inspired thought and action.

But just as little as nature can tolerate a vacuum, so humankind can little tolerate a complete loss of meaning. Thence, to escape the plunge into the abyss of meaninglessness, we grasp after flotsam, attempting to immerse ourselves in distractions. We pursue pleasure and power, seek to augment our wealth and status, surround ourselves with contraptions, invest our hopes in personal relationships that only conceal our own inner poverty. At the same time, however, that our absorption in distractions helps us to cope with the psychological void, it also stifles in us a deeper and still more insistent need — the longing for a peace and freedom that does not depend upon external contingencies.

One of the great blessings of the Buddha's teaching is the remedy it can offer for the problem of meaninglessness so widespread in human life today. The Dhamma can serve as a source of meaning primarily because it provides us with the two requisites of a meaningful life: an ultimate goal for which to live, and a clearcut but flexible set of instructions by which we can advance toward that goal from whatever station in life we start from.

In the Buddha's teaching the quest for ultimate meaning does not begin, as in the theistic religions, with propositions about a supernatural scheme of salvation to be assented to in faith. It begins, rather, by focusing upon an experiential problem right at the crux of human existence. The problem, of course, is the problem of suffering, the boundaries of which are shown to extend beyond our immediate subjection to pain, misery and sorrow, and to encompass all that is conditioned precisely because of its impermanence, its vulnerability, its lack of abiding substance.

The goal of the teaching, the unconditioned element which is Nibbana, then comes to have a decisive bearing upon our vital concerns because it is apprehended as the cessation of suffering. Though in its own nature it defies all the limiting categories of conceptual thought, as the cessation of suffering Nibbana provides the final answer to our innermost yearnings for an imperishable peace, for complete freedom from sorrow, anxiety and distress. The way that the quest for this goal intersects with the course of our everyday life is made plain by the Buddha's analysis of the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering, the Buddha holds, lies within ourself, in our selfish craving conjoined with blinding ignorance, in the three evil roots that taint our normal engagement with the world: greed, hate and delusion. Thence the freedom from suffering that we seek lies in the eradication of these three roots.

To orient our life toward the goal of deliverance from suffering requires that we tread the path that leads to and merges with the goal. This path is the Noble Eightfold Path, which brings an end to suffering and bondage by enabling us to extricate the causes of suffering embedded in our hearts. We begin the path exactly where we are, in the midst of error and defilement, and by clarifying our views, transforming our attitudes, and purifying our minds, we advance by stages toward the direct realization of the ultimate good.

If the goal toward which the path points lies beyond the pale of conditioned existence, to walk the eightfold path is to discover within the confines of conditioned existence dimensions of meaning previously unknown. This richness of meaning stems from a twofold source. One is the recognition that the following of the path brings a diminishment of suffering for ourselves as well as others, and at the same time an enhancement of joy, mental equipoise and peace. The other source of meaning is the conviction that the values we are pursuing are not merely subjective and arbitrary, but are grounded in an absolutely objective order, in the very nature of things.

As we embark on the way to the end of suffering, the final goal no longer appears merely as a distant shore but becomes refracted in our experience as the challenge of overcoming the unwholesome roots, and of assisting our fellow beings to do the same. This challenge, the task of actualizing our own good and the good of others, becomes at the same time life's inner core of meaning: to transmute greed into generosity and relinquishment, to replace hate with love and compassion, and to dispel delusion with the light of liberative wisdom.

Chapter 15

The Search for Security

It may be a truism of psychology that the desire for happiness is the most fundamental human drive, but it is important to note that this desire generally operates within the bounds set by another drive just as deep and pervasive. This other drive is the need for security. However insistent the raw itch for pleasure and gain may be, it is usually held in check by a cautious concern for our personal safety. We only feel at ease when we are sealed off from manifest danger, comfortably at home with ourselves and with our world, snugly tucked into familiar territory where everything seems friendly and dependable.

When we come across the Buddha's teaching and begin to take that teaching seriously, we often find that it provokes in us disturbing waves of disquietude. This feeling arises from a clash — a sensed incompatibility — between the picture of the world that we hold to as the essential basis for our normal sense of security and the new perspectives on existence opened up to us by the Dhamma. We may try to shun the vistas that trouble us, we may pick and choose from the Dhamma what we like; but to the extent that we are prepared to take the teaching in earnest — on its own terms rather than on ours — we may discover that the insights which the Buddha wants to impart to us can be quite unsettling in their impact.

The first noble truth was never intended to be a comfortable truth; indeed, it is the discomforting quality of this truth that makes it noble. It tells us frankly that the routinely placid and predictable surface of our everyday lives is extremely fragile — a shared delusion with which we lull ourselves and each other into a false sense of security. Just beneath the surface, hidden from view, turbulent currents are stirring which at any time can break the surface calm. From the moment we are born we are sliding toward old age and death, susceptible to various diseases and accidents that may hasten our arrival at the appointed end. Driven by our desires we wander from life to life across the sand dunes of samsara, elated by our rises, shaken by our falls. The very stuff of our lives consists of nothing more than a conglomeration of five "heaps" of psychophysical processes, without any permanence or substance. Perhaps the Buddha's most poignant statement on the human condition is his image of a man being swept along by a mountain torrent: he grasps for safety at the grasses along the banks only to find that they break off just as he takes hold of them.

However, though the Buddha begins by drawing our attention to the uncertainty that encompasses us even in the midst of comfort and enjoyment, he by no means ends there. The discourse on suffering is expounded, not to lead us to despair, but to awaken us from our complacent slumbers and to set us moving in the direction where our ultimate welfare can be found. Far from undercutting our need to feel secure, the Buddha's teaching unfolds from that very same need, turning it into a sustained inquiry into what genuine security actually means.

Ordinarily, our benighted attempts to achieve security are governed by a myopic but imperious self-interest oriented around the standpoint of self. We assume that we possess a solid core of individual being, an inherently existent ego, and thus our varied plans and projects take shape as so many maneuvers to ward off threats to the self and promote its dominance in the overall scheme of things. The Buddha turns this whole point of view on its head by pointing out that anxiety is the dark twin of ego. He declares that all attempts to secure the interests of the ego necessarily arise out of clinging, and that the very act of clinging paves the way for our downfall when the object to which we hold perishes, as it must by its very nature.

The Buddha maintains that the way to true security lies precisely in the abolition of clinging. When all clinging has been uprooted, when all notions of "I" and "mine" have lost their obsessive sting, we will have no more fear, no more worry, no more anxious concern. Touched by the fluctuations of worldly events the mind remains stable, "sorrowless, stainless and secure" (Sn. 268).

While ultimate security lies only in the unconditioned, in Nibbana "the supreme security from bondage" (*anuttara yogakkhema*), as we wend our way through the rough terrain of our mundane lives we have available a provisional source of security that will help us deal effectively with the dangers and difficulties that beset us. This provisional security lies in firmly committing ourselves to the Dhamma as our source of solace and guidance, as our incomparable refuge. The word "dhamma" itself means that which upholds and supports. The Buddha's teaching is called the Dhamma because it upholds those who live by it: it wards off the dangers to

which we would be exposed if we were to flout it, it sustains us in our endeavor for the final good if we revere it and make it the foundation of our lives.

The Dhamma provides protection, not by any mystical blessing or downpour of saving grace, but by indicating the sure and certain guidelines that enable us to protect ourselves. Beneath the apparent randomness of visible events there runs an invisible but indomitable law which ensures that all goodness finds its due recompense. To act counter to this law is to invite disaster. To act in harmony with it is to tap its reserves of energy, to yoke them to one's spiritual growth, and to make oneself a channel of help for others who likewise roam in search of a refuge.

The essential counsel that the Buddha gives us to secure our self-protection is to shun all evil, to practice the good, and to purify our minds. By the pursuit of non-violence, honesty, righteousness and truth we weave around ourselves an impenetrable net of virtue that ensures our well being even in the midst of violence and commotion. By cultivating the good we sow the seeds of wholesome qualities that will come to maturity as we continue on our path throughout the samsaric journey. And by purifying our minds of greed, hatred and delusion by mindfulness and diligent effort we will find for ourselves an island that no flood can overwhelm — the island of the Deathless.

Chapter 16

Self-transformation

It is perhaps symptomatic of the "fallen" nature of the ordinary human condition that few of us pass the full extent of our lives comfortably reconciled to our natural selves. Even in the midst of prosperity and success, grinding notes of discontent trouble our days and disturbing dreams come to haunt our sleep. As long as our eyes remain coated with dust we incline to locate the cause of our discontent outside ourselves — in spouse, neighbor or job, in implacable fate or fluky chance. But when the dust drops off and our eyes open, we soon find that the real cause lies within.

When we discover how deeply the cause of our unhappiness is lodged in the mind, the realization dawns that cosmetic changes will not be anywhere near enough, that a fundamental internal transformation is required. This desire for a transformed personality, for the emergence of a new man from the ashes of the old, is one of the perennial lures of the human heart. From ancient times it has been a potent wellspring of the spiritual quest, and even in the secular, life-affirming culture of our own cosmopolitan age this longing has not totally disappeared.

While such concepts as redemption, salvation and deliverance may no longer characterize the transformation that is sought, the urge for a radical reshaping of the personality persists as strong as ever, appearing in guises that are compatible with the secular worldview. Where previously this urge sought fulfillment in the temple, ashram and monastery, it now resorts to new venues: the office of the psychoanalyst, the weekend workshop, the panoply of newly spawned therapies and cults. However, despite the change of scene and conceptual framework, the basic pattern remains the same. Disgruntled with the ruts of our ingrained habits, we long to exchange all that is dense and constrictive in our personalities for a new, lighter, freer mode of being.

Self-transformation is also a fundamental goal of the Buddha's teaching, an essential part of his program for liberation from suffering. The Dhamma was never intended for those who are already perfect saints. It is addressed to fallible human beings beset with all the shortcomings typical of unpolished human nature: conduct that is fickle and impulsive, minds that are tainted by greed, anger and selfishness, views that are distorted and habits that lead to harm for oneself and others. The purpose of the teaching is to transform such people — ourselves — into "accomplished ones": into those whose every action is pure, whose minds are calm and composed, whose wisdom has fathomed the deepest truths and whose conduct is always marked by a compassionate concern for others and for the welfare of the world.

Between these two poles of the teaching — the flawed and knotted personality that we bring with us as raw material into the training, and the fully liberated personality that emerges in the end — there lies a gradual process of self-transformation governed by highly specific guidelines. This transformation is effected by the twin aspects of the path: abandoning (*pahana*), the removal from the mind of all that is harmful and unwholesome, and development (*bhavana*), the cultivation of qualities that are wholesome, pure and purifying.

What distinguishes the Buddha's program for self-transformation from the multitude of other systems proposing a similar end is the contribution made by another principle with which it is invariably conjoined. This is the principle of self-transcendence, the endeavor to relinquish all attempts to establish a sense of solid personal identity. In the Buddhist training the aim of transforming the personality must be complemented by a parallel effort to overcome all identification with the elements that constitute our phenomenal being. The teaching of *anatta* or not-self is not so much a philosophical thesis calling for intellectual assent as a prescription for self-transcendence. It maintains that our ongoing attempt to establish a sense of identity by taking our personalities to be "I" and "mine" is in actuality a project born out of clinging, a project that at the same time lies at the root of our suffering. If, therefore, we seek to be free from suffering, we cannot stop with the transformation of the personality into some sublime and elevated mode as the final goal. What is needed, rather, is a transformation that brings about the removal of clinging, and with it, the removal of all tendencies to self-affirmation.

It is important to stress this transcendent aspect of the Dhamma because, in our own time when "immanent" secular values are ascendent, the temptation is great to let this aspect drop out of sight. If we assume that the

worth of a practice consists solely in its ability to yield concrete this-worldly results, we may incline to view the Dhamma simply as a means of refining and healing the divided personality, leading in the end to a renewed affirmation of our mundane selves and our situation in the world. Such an approach, however, would ignore the Buddha's insistence that all the elements of our personal existence are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self, and his counsel that we should learn to distance ourselves from such things and ultimately to discard them.

In the proper practice of the Dhamma both principles, that of self-transformation and that of self-transcendence, are equally crucial. The principle of self-transformation alone is blind, leading at best to an ennobled personality but not to a liberated one. The principle of self-transcendence alone is barren, leading to a cold ascetic withdrawal devoid of the potential for enlightenment. It is only when these two complementary principles work in harmony, blended and balanced in the course of training, that they can bridge the gap between the actual and ideal and bring to a fruitful conclusion the quest for the end of suffering.

Of the two principles, that of self-transcendence claims primacy both at the beginning of the path and at the end. For it is this principle that gives direction to the process of self-transformation, revealing the goal toward which a transformation of the personality should lead and the nature of the changes required to bring the goal within our reach. However, the Buddhist path is not a perpendicular ascent to be scaled with picks, ropes and studded boots, but a step-by-step training which unfolds in a natural progression. Thus the abrupt challenge of self-transcendence — the relinquishing of all points of attachment — is met and mastered by the gradual process of self-transformation. By moral discipline, mental purification and the development of insight, we advance by stages from our original condition of bondage to the domain of untrammeled freedom.

Chapter 17

A Note on Openness

The sudden entry into general circulation of a familiar term with a new ambience of meaning often has a significance that goes beyond mere philological curiosity. Since language is molded by thought at a level prior to and more basic than that of deliberate design, such changes in linguistic currency may well signal deeper changes taking place in the mental make-up of those who use the term. They can be seen as barometric indicators of transformations in the sphere of consciousness — in our patterns of thinking, in our attitudes, in our goals.

If there is one term that might be chosen to characterize the intellectual and moral climate of the present day, it would be the word "openness." This seemingly colorless word has come to mark the fulfillment of the centuries-long struggle against the oppressive weight of established tradition in so many diverse departments of human concern. Its three syllables are a hymn of victory for the triumph of the empirical method over formulated dogma as the key to knowledge, for the primacy of individual conscience over prescribed morality in the domain of ethics, and in our private lives, for the replacement of the reign of the superego by a new-found liberty to explore the subterranean channels of impulse and desire in whatever direction they might lead.

Perhaps most importantly, the notion of openness also points to a particular attitude toward experience, an attitude which has quietly permeated our culture so thoroughly that it now seems almost an innate human disposition. Briefly, this attitude might be described as a soft and affable affirmation of experience in its totality, coupled with a pliant receptivity to its full range of forms. This attitude, it must be stressed, only rarely solidifies into a consciously held conviction; more typically it lingers in the background of the mind as an unverbalized intuition, a fluid and shifting orientation toward the world. Historically rooted in the widespread decline of belief structures centered upon a transcendent goal of human life and an objectively grounded scale of values, the philosophy of openness takes all truth to be relative, all values personal and subjective. Thus it holds that our task in life is to open ourselves as fully as we can to the unfolding miracle of existence and to celebrate its infinite possibilities.

The spread of this attitude through the general culture has left its stamp on current interpretations of Buddhism as well. We thus find that for many of today's Buddhist teachers the Dhamma is essentially a method for arriving at the consummation of all that the notion of openness implies. From this perspective Buddhism is not a doctrine with its own distinct body of tenets, not a discipline guiding us to a supramundane goal, but a tool for opening to the here and now. The most basic flaw at the bottom of human suffering, it is held, is our tendency to close ourselves off from experience, to lock ourselves with our concepts and judgments into a limited compartment of reality. By developing through meditation a non-discriminating "choiceless" awareness which allows whatever arises to hold its ground, we are enabled to break through our constraints and merge with the stream of events, to dance with the "ten thousand things" — accepting them all yet without clinging to them.

While the advocates of openness are usually adroit in assimilating their principles to the classical Dhamma, a careful examination would reveal gaping differences between the two. Here I want to focus only on some crucial differences in their respective orientations toward experience. It should be noted at once that whereas the school of openness bids us to drop our discriminations, judgments and restraints in order to immerse ourselves in the dynamic flow of immediate experience, the Buddha prescribes an attitude toward experience that arises from carefully wrought judgments, employs precise discriminations, and issues in detachment and restraint. This attitude, the classical Buddhist counterfoil to the modern program of openness, might be summed up by one word found everywhere in the ancient texts. That word is heedfulness (*appamada*).

Heedfulness denotes an attitude of critical scrutiny directed toward one's own mind both in its internal movement and in its reactions to external affairs. The term suggests diligent effort and acute attentiveness, and it further sounds a note of moral caution and care. It thus implies, as the Buddha intended it to imply, that we are constantly exposed to danger — a danger born from within that becomes ever more imminent to the degree that we allow heedfulness to slip and we slide into its opposite: into heedlessness or negligence (*pamada*).

Such caution is necessary because deeds have consequences that extend beyond themselves. Whereas the school of openness tends to subordinate concern with the consequential aspect of action to a stress on abiding in the present moment, the classical Dhamma taught by the Buddha asks us to recognize that all willed actions, even our fleeting thoughts and impulses, are seeds with roots buried deep in the mind's beginningless past and with the potency to generate results in the distant horizons of the future. These long-range consequences of action are of enormous importance to us; for however far they might lie from our vision now, when the time comes for our deeds to ripen, it is we ourselves who must experience their fruits. As these fruits are invariably determined by the moral quality of our actions, diligent self-examination — that is, heedfulness — is urgently needed so that we may restrain ourselves from those deeds that seem pleasant but bear painful results, and so that we may apply ourselves to those deeds that may be difficult but yield long-term benefits.

The mode of thinking based on openness rejects duality as a product of discrimination and deluded concepts. It tacitly presupposes that existence as such is ultimately benign; that beyond our deluded concepts, the rich and vivid diversity of forms has a single taste, a taste that is sweet. In contrast, the attitude of heedfulness is grounded upon the view that existence is textured through and through by dualities that are profound and inescapably real. The world bears testimony to this vision in the contrast between the charming, delightful surfaces of things and their underlying hollowness and inadequacy; our minds bear testimony in the ongoing contest between the wholesome mental factors and the unwholesome ones, between the upward urge for purification and the downward pull of the defilements. That this duality is not trivial is seen by the consequences: the one leads to Nibbana, the state of deliverance, the Deathless, while the other leads back into the round of repeated birth, samsara, which is also the realm of Mara, the Lord of Death.

To practice heedfulness is to take full account of these dualities with their profound implications. The heedful person does not aim at a choiceless awareness open to existence in its totality, for to open oneself thus is to risk making oneself vulnerable to just those elements in oneself that keep one bound to the realm of Mara. The awareness developed through heedfulness is built upon a choice — a well-considered choice to abandon those qualities one understands to be detrimental and to develop in their place those qualities one understands to be beneficial, the states that lead to purity and peace.

Both in our outer involvements in the world and in the mind's internal procession of thought, imagination and emotion, there continually spreads before us a forked road. One branch of this fork beckons with the promise of pleasure and satisfaction but in the end leads to pain and bondage; the other, steep and difficult to climb, leads upward to enlightenment and liberation. To discard discrimination and judgment for an easy-going openness to the world is to blur the important distinction between these two quite different paths. To be heedful is to be aware of the dichotomy, and to strive to avoid the one and pursue the other. As the Buddha reminds us, heedfulness is the path to the Deathless, heedlessness is the path of Death.

Chapter 18

Laying Down the Rod

The textbooks of history come into our hands bound in decorative covers and set in crisp clear types. To the discerning reader, however, their glossy pages are stained with blood and wet with streams of tears. The story of man's sojourn on this planet has generally not been a very pretty one. For sure, deeds of virtue and flashes of the sublime light up the tale like meteorites shooting across the night time sky. But the pageant of events that the records spell out for us unfolds according to a repeated pattern in which the dominant motifs are greed and ambition, deceit and distrust, aggression, destruction and revenge.

Each age, when the dust of its own battles clears, tends to see itself as standing at the threshold of a new era in which peace and harmony will at last prevail. This appears to be particularly true of our own time, with its high ideals and great expectations aroused by dramatic shifts in international relations. It would be ingenuous, however, to think that a package solution to the tensions inherent in human coexistence can be devised as easily as a solution to a problem in data management. To cherish the dream that we have arrived at the brink of a new world order in which all conflict, in obedience to our good intentions, will be relegated to the past is to lose sight of the grim obstinacy of those deep dark drives that stir in the human heart: the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. It is these drives that have brought us into this world of strife and suffering, and it is these same drives that keep the wheel of history turning, erupting periodically in orgies of senseless violence.

Like any other stream, the stream of mundane existence inevitably flows in the direction of least resistance: downward. The task the Buddha sets before us is not the impossible one of reversing the direction of the flow, but the feasible one of crossing the stream, of arriving safely at the far shore where we will be free from the dangers that beset us as we are swept along by the stream. To cross the stream requires a struggle, not against the current itself, but against the forces that carry us down the current, a struggle against the defilements lodged in the depths of our own minds.

Though violence, either overt or subtle, may hold sway over the world in which we are afloat, the Buddha's path to freedom requires of us that we make a total break with prevailing norms. Thus one of the essential steps in our endeavor to reach the abode of safety is to "lay down the rod," to put away violence, aggression and harmfulness toward all living beings. In the Buddha's teaching the "laying down of the rod" is not merely an ethical principle, a prescription for right action. It is a comprehensive strategy of self-training that spans all stages of the Buddhist path, enabling us to subdue our inclinations toward ill will, animosity and cruelty.

The key to developing a mind of harmlessness is found in the ancient maxim stated in the Dhammapada: "Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not slay or incite others to slay." The reason we should avoid harming others is because all living beings, in their innermost nature, share the same essential concern for their own well being and happiness. When we look into our own minds, we can immediately see with intuitive certainty that the fundamental desire at the root of our being is the desire to be well and happy, to be free from all harm, danger and distress. We see at once that we wish to live, not to die; that we wish to be happy, not to suffer; that we wish to pursue our goals freely, without hindrance and obstruction by others.

When we see that this wish for well being and happiness is the most basic desire at the root of our own being, by a simple imaginative projection we can then recognize, again with intuitive certainty, that the same fundamental desire animates the minds of all other living beings as well. Just as we wish to be well, so every other being wishes to be well; just as we wish to be happy, so every other being wishes to be happy; just as we wish to pursue our goals freely, so all other beings wish to pursue their goals freely, without hindrance and obstruction.

This fundamental identity of aim that we share with all other beings has implications for each stage of the threefold Buddhist training in morality, mental purification and wisdom. Since all other beings, like ourselves, are intent on their welfare and happiness, by putting ourselves in their place we can recognize the need to regulate our conduct by principles of restraint that hold in check all harmful bodily and verbal deeds. Because afflictive deeds originate from the mind, from thoughts of animosity and cruelty, it becomes necessary for us to purify our minds of these taints through the practice of concentration, developing as their specific antidotes

the "divine abodes" of loving-kindness and compassion. And because all defiled thoughts tending toward harm for others arise from roots lodged deep in the recesses of the mind, we need to undertake the development of wisdom, which alone can extricate the hidden roots of evil.

Since the state of the world is a manifestation and reflection of the minds of its inhabitants, the achievement of a permanent universal peace would require nothing short of a radical and widespread transformation in the minds of these inhabitants — a beautiful but unrealistic fantasy. What lies within the scope of real possibility is the attainment of a lasting individual peace within ourselves, a peace that comes with the fulfillment of the Buddha's threefold training. This internal peace, however, will not remain locked up in our hearts. Overflowing its source, it will radiate outward, exercising a gentle and uplifting influence upon the lives of those who come within its range. As the old Indian adage says, one can never make the earth safe for one's feet by sweeping away all thorns and gravel, but if one wears a pair of shoes one's feet will be comfortable everywhere. One can never be free from enmity by eliminating all one's foes, but if one strikes down one thing — the thought of hate — one will see no enemies anywhere.

Chapter 19

An Auspicious Month

During the month of July two of the BPS's guiding lights since its inception passed important milestones in their lives. One of these is Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera — our cofounder, long-term president and editor, and current patron — who on 21 July reached his ninetieth birthday. Fortunately, despite weak legs and impaired vision, Ven. Nyanaponika has enjoyed general good health, and thus was able to welcome the many visitors who called on him that day to pay their respects and to express to him their gratitude for his lucid exposition of the Dhamma and selfless service to the spread of the teachings over an illustrious career of so many years.

To commemorate the occasion the management and staff of the Buddhist Publication Society held an alms offering and felicitation meeting at the Mahathera's residence, the Forest Hermitage in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve near Kandy. After the meal offering, speaking on behalf of the BPS Board of Management, Mr. Harilal Wickremeratne announced to the Mahathera that as a token of our appreciation for him, the BPS has established a scholarship fund at the University of Peradeniya to be called "The Ven. Nyanaponika Mahathera Scholarship Fund for Postgraduate Research into Theravada Buddhism." The scholarship, to be generated by the interest earned from a fixed deposit set up in a commercial bank in Kandy, is to be awarded to a scholar selected by the University for postgraduate studies in the philosophy, ethics, or literature of Theravada Buddhism.

Felicitation for Ven. Nyanaponika was especially prominent in his native Germany, the land he left so long ago in order to embrace the monk's life here in Sri Lanka. The University of Konstanz, in its Buddhist Modernism series, has issued a volume of writings, talks, texts, photos, and other documents to mark the Mahathera's completion of his ninth decade. The book, compiled by Professor Detlof Kantowsky, is entitled *Nicht derselbe und nicht ein anderer* ("Neither the same nor another"), the famous line from the *Milindapañha* which Ven. Nyanaponika quoted to the editor when reviewing photographs of himself as a boy and as a young man. (For ordering information inquire from: Prof. Detlof Kantowsky, Universitat Konstanz, Postfach 5560, D-7750 Konstanz 1, Germany.)

In Sri Lanka, his adopted home, Ven. Nyanaponika was recently accorded special honor when the Prime Minister's office selected him as one of a hundred "outstanding Sri Lankans" whose image is to be preserved in bronze in a planned national Hall of Fame. Accordingly, in late June Mr. Harold Peiris of the Ministry of Finance, who is in charge of the project, came to Kandy with the talented sculptor, Mr. Sarath Chandrajiva, to fashion a bust of the Mahathera. The clay model the sculptor molded in less than two hours was strikingly faithful to Ven. Nyanaponika's features, and was used to create on the spot a plaster-of-paris mold from which the finished bust is to be cast out of bronze. The bust will be exhibited temporarily in the national art gallery in Colombo, along with those of the other nominees, until a permanent exhibition hall is built for them.

The other guiding light of the BPS to achieve distinction this past July is Ven. Piyadassi Mahathera, the editor of our Sinhala Damsak Series and author of numerous BPS titles both in English and Sinhala. By unanimous acclamation, in appreciation of his indefatigable services to the Buddha-Sasana, the Mahanayaka Theras of the Sangha Council of the Amarapura Nikaya selected Ven. Piyadassi to be appointed as a Sangha Nayaka Thera — a leading elder of the Order — with the honorary designation *Vishvakirti Sri Sasanasobhana*, "universally famous glorious ornament of the Teaching." On 18 July at a ceremony held at his alma mater, Nalanda College in Colombo, the new Nayaka Thera received his formal notice of appointment from Prime Minister D.B. Wijetunga before a large gathering led by the Mahanayaka Theras and President Ranasingha Premadasa. Although such honors rest lightly on the shoulders of a monk like Ven. Piyadassi, it is gratifying to us at the BPS to see this "glorious ornament" of our own Society receive the recognition he so rightly deserves.

At the age of 90 Ven. Nyanaponika is now in his 55th year in the Sangha; at the age of 77 Ven. Piyadassi is now in his 58th year. An inveterate traveler and preacher, Ven. Piyadassi has circled the globe twelve times and at home can be scheduled to give three or four sermons a day — sometimes on one side of the island in the morning and on the other side in the evening. Ven. Nyanaponika, in contrast, has remained almost consistently in Sri Lanka since his arrival here in 1936; yet from the quietude of his hermitage, through the agency of his publications, he has sent his words of wisdom and consolation to the far corners of the earth, translated into

more than half a dozen languages.

May these two great elders, who have both in their different ways toiled selflessly for the welfare of the many, enjoy abundant good health and happiness. And may they be with us, as noble friends and advisors for a long time yet to come!

Chapter 20

The Nobility of the Truths

The most common and widely known formulation of the Buddha's teaching is that which the Buddha himself announced in the First Sermon at Benares, the formula of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha declares that these truths convey in a nutshell all the essential information that we need to set out on the path to liberation. He says that just as the elephant's footprint, by reason of its great size, contains the footprints of all other animals, so the Four Noble Truths, by reason of their comprehensiveness, contain within themselves all wholesome and beneficial teachings. However, while many expositors of Buddhism have devoted attention to explaining the actual content of the four truths, only rarely is any consideration given to the reason why they are designated noble truths. Yet it is just this descriptive word "noble" that reveals to us why the Buddha chose to cast his teaching into this specific format, and it is this same term that allows us to experience, even from afar, the unique flavor that pervades the entire doctrine and discipline of the Enlightened One.

The word "noble," or *ariya*, is used by the Buddha to designate a particular type of person, the type of person which it is the aim of his teaching to create. In the discourses the Buddha classifies human beings into two broad categories. On one side there are the *puthujjanas*, the worldlings, those belonging to the multitude, whose eyes are still covered with the dust of defilements and delusion. On the other side there are the *ariyans*, the noble ones, the spiritual elite, who obtain this status not from birth, social station or ecclesiastical authority but from their inward nobility of character.

These two general types are not separated from each other by an impassable chasm, each confined to a tightly sealed compartment. A series of gradations can be discerned rising up from the darkest level of the blind worldling trapped in the dungeon of egotism and self-assertion, through the stage of the virtuous worldling in whom the seeds of wisdom are beginning to sprout, and further through the intermediate stages of noble disciples to the perfected individual at the apex of the entire scale of human development. This is the arahant, the liberated one, who has absorbed the purifying vision of truth so deeply that all his defilements have been extinguished, and with them, all liability to suffering.

While the path from bondage to deliverance, from worldliness to spiritual nobility, is a graded path involving gradual practice and gradual progress, it is not a uniform continuum. Progress occurs in discrete steps, and at a certain point — the point separating the status of a worldling from that of a noble one — a break is reached which must be crossed, not by simply taking another step forward, but by making a leap, by jumping across from the near side to the further shore. This decisive event in the inner development of the practitioner, this radical leap that propels the disciple from the domain and lineage of the worldling to the domain and lineage of the noble ones, occurs precisely through the penetration of the Four Noble Truths. This discloses to us the critical reason why the four truths revealed by the Buddha are called noble truths. They are noble truths because when we have penetrated them through to the core, when we have grasped their real import and implications, we cast off the status of the worldling and acquire the status of a noble one, drawn out from the faceless crowd into the community of the Blessed One's disciples united by a unique and unshakable vision.

Prior to the penetration of the truths, however well endowed we may be with spiritual virtues, we are not yet on secure ground. We are not immune from regression, not yet assured of deliverance, not invincible in our striving on the path. The virtues of a worldling are tenuous virtues. They may wax or they may wane, they may flourish or decline, and in correspondence with their degree of strength we may rise or fall in our movement through the cycle of becoming. When our virtues are replete we may rise upward and dwell in bliss among the gods; when our virtues decline or our merit is exhausted we may sink again to miserable depths.

But with the penetration of the truths we leap across the gulf that separates us from the ranks of the noble ones. The eye of Dhamma has been opened, the vision of truth stands revealed, and though the decisive victory has not yet been won, the path to the final goal lies at our feet and the supreme security from bondage hovers on the horizon. One who has comprehended the truths has changed lineage, crossed over from the domain of the worldlings to the domain of the noble ones. Such a disciple is incapable of regression to the ranks of the worldling, incapable of losing the vision of truth that has flashed before his inner eye. Progress toward the final

goal, the complete eradication of ignorance and craving, may be slow or rapid; it may occur easily or result from an uphill battle. But however long it may take, with whatever degree of facility one may advance, one thing is certain: such a disciple who has seen with immaculate clarity the Four Noble Truths can never slide backward, can never lose the status of a noble one, and is bound to reach the final fruit of arahantship in a maximum of seven lives.

The reason why the penetration of the Four Noble Truths can confer this immutable nobility of spirit is implied by the four tasks the noble truths impose on us. By taking these tasks as our challenge in life — our challenge as followers of the Enlightened One — from whatever station of development we find ourselves beginning at, we can gradually advance toward the infallible penetration of the noble ones.

The first noble truth, the truth of suffering, is to be fully understood: the task it assigns us is that of full understanding. A hallmark of the noble ones is that they do not flow along thoughtlessly with the stream of life, but endeavor to comprehend existence from within, as honestly and thoroughly as possible. For us, too, it is necessary to reflect upon the nature of our life. We must attempt to fathom the deep significance of an existence bounded on one side by birth and on the other by death, and subject in between to all the types of suffering detailed by the Buddha in his discourses.

The second noble truth, of the origin or cause of suffering, implies the task of abandonment. A noble one is such because he has initiated the process of eliminating the defilements at the root of suffering, and we too, if we aspire to reach the plane of the noble ones, must be prepared to withstand the seductive lure of the defilements. While the eradication of craving can come only with the supramundane realizations, even in the mundane course of our daily life we can learn to restrain the coarser manifestation of defilements, and by keen self-observation can gradually loosen their grip upon our hearts.

The third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, implies the task of realization. Although Nibbana, the extinction of suffering, can only be personally realized by the noble ones, the confidence we place in the Dhamma as our guideline to life shows us what we should select as our final aspiration, as our ultimate ground of value. Once we have grasped the fact that all conditioned things in the world, being impermanent and insubstantial, can never give us total satisfaction, we can then lift our aim to the unconditioned element, Nibbana the Deathless, and make that aspiration the pole around which we order our everyday choices and concerns.

Finally, the fourth noble truth, the Noble Eightfold Path, assigns us the task of development. The noble ones have reached their status by developing the eightfold path, and while only the noble ones are assured of never deviating from the path, the Buddha's teaching gives us the meticulous instructions that we need to tread the path culminating in the plane of the noble ones. This is the path that gives birth to vision, that gives birth to knowledge, that leads to higher comprehension, enlightenment and Nibbana, the crowning attainment of nobility.

Chapter 21

Refuge in the Buddha

The first step in entering the Buddhist path is going for refuge to the Triple Gem, and the first of the three gems that we approach as refuge is the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Because the act of going for refuge to the Buddha marks the beginning of a new chapter in our life, it is worth our while to repeatedly pause and reflect upon the significance of this momentous step. Too often we are prone to take our first steps for granted. Yet it is only if we review these steps from time to time in a deepening awareness of their implications that we can be sure the following steps we take will bring us closer to our desired destination.

The going for refuge to the Buddha is not a single action which occurs only once and is then completed with absolute finality. It is, or should be, a continually evolving process which matures in tandem with our practice and understanding of the Dhamma. To go for refuge does not imply that at the outset we already possess a clear grasp of the dangers that make a refuge necessary or of the goal toward which we aspire. Comprehension of these matters grows gradually over time. But to the extent that we have actually gone for refuge with sincere intent, we should make an earnest effort to sharpen and deepen our understanding of the objects to which we have turned as the basis for our deliverance.

In going for refuge to the Buddha it is most essential at the outset to clarify our conception of what a Buddha is and how he functions as a refuge. If such clarification is lacking, our sense of refuge can easily become tainted by erroneous views. We may ascribe to the Buddha a status he never claimed for himself, as when we regard him as the incarnation of a god, as the emanation of the Absolute, or as a personal savior. On the other hand, we may detract from the exalted status to which the Buddha is properly entitled, as when we regard him simply as a benevolent sage, as an unusually astute Asiatic philosopher, or as a genius of meditative technology.

A correct view of the Buddha's nature would see him in terms of the title he assigned to himself: as a Fully Self-Enlightened One (*samma sambuddha*). He is self-enlightened because he has awakened to the essential truths of existence entirely on his own, without a teacher or guide. He is fully enlightened because he has comprehended these truths completely, in all their ramifications and implications. And as a Buddha he has not only fathomed these truths himself, but has also taught them to the world so that others may awaken from the long sleep of ignorance and attain the fruits of liberation.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is an act anchored in a particular historical individual: the recluse Gotama, the scion of the Sakyan clan, who lived and taught in the Ganges valley in the fifth century B.C. When we take refuge in the Buddha, we rely upon this historical individual and the body of instruction that stems from him. It is important to stress this point in view of the fashionable notion that taking refuge in the Buddha means that we take refuge in "the Buddha-mind within ourselves" or in "the universal principle of enlightenment." Such ideas, allowed to go unchecked, can lead to the belief that anything we contrive in the flights of our imagination can qualify as true Dhamma. To the contrary, the Buddhist tradition insists that when we go for refuge to the Buddha, we place ourselves under the guidance of one who is distinctly different from ourselves, one who has scaled heights that we have barely begun to glimpse.

But when we rely upon the recluse Gotama as our refuge, we do not apprehend him merely as a particular individual, a wise and sensible sage. We apprehend him rather as a Buddha. It is his Buddhahood — his possession of the full range of excellent qualities that come with perfect enlightenment — that makes the recluse Gotama a refuge. In any cosmic epoch, a Buddha is that being who first breaks through the dark mass of ignorance encompassing the world and rediscovers the lost path to Nibbana, the cessation of suffering. He is the pioneer, the trailblazer, who discovers the path and proclaims the path so that others, by following his tracks, may extinguish their ignorance, arrive at true wisdom, and break the fetters that tie them to the round of repeated birth and death.

For the refuge in the Buddha to be genuine, it must be accompanied by a commitment to the Buddha as an incomparable teacher, as unexcelled and unsurpassed. Strictly speaking, the historical Buddha is not unique since there have been earlier Fully Enlightened Ones who have arisen in past epochs and there will be others who will arise in future epochs as well. But in any one world system it is impossible for a second Buddha to

arise while the teaching of another Buddha is still extant, and thus in terms of human history we are justified in regarding the Buddha as a unique teacher, unequalled by any other spiritual teacher known to humanity. It is this readiness to recognize the Buddha as "the unsurpassed trainer of persons to be tamed, the teacher of gods and humans" that is the hallmark of an authentic act of taking refuge in the Buddha.

The Buddha serves as a refuge by teaching the Dhamma. The actual and final refuge, embedded within the Dhamma as refuge, is Nibbana, "the deathless element free from clinging, the sorrowless state that is void of stain" (Itiv. 51). The Dhamma as refuge comprises the final goal, the path that leads to that goal, and the body of teachings that explain the practice of the path. The Buddha as refuge has no capacity to grant us liberation by an act of will. He proclaims the path to be traveled and the principles to be understood. The actual work of walking the path is then left to us, his disciples.

The proper response to the Buddha as refuge is trust and confidence. Trust is required because the doctrine taught by the Buddha runs counter to our innate understanding of ourselves and our natural orientation toward the world. To accept this teaching thus tends to arouse an inner resistance, even to provoke a rebellion against the changes it requires us to make in the way we lead our lives. But when we place trust in the Buddha we open ourselves to his guidance. By going to him for refuge we show that we are prepared to recognize that our inherent tendencies to self-affirmation and grasping are in truth the cause of our suffering. And we are ready to accept his counsel that to become free from suffering, these tendencies must be controlled and eliminated.

Confidence in the Buddha as our refuge is initially awakened when we contemplate his sublime virtues and his excellent teaching. It grows through our undertaking of the training. At first our confidence in the Buddha may be hesitant, punctured by doubts and perplexity. But as we apply ourselves to the practice of his path, we find that our defilements gradually lessen, that wholesome qualities increase, and with this comes a growing sense of freedom, peace and joy. This experience confirms our initial trust, disposing us to advance a few steps further. When at last we see the truth of the Dhamma for ourselves, the refuge in the Buddha becomes inviolable. Confidence then becomes conviction, the conviction that the Blessed One is "the speaker, the proclaimer, the bringer of the good, the giver of the Deathless, the lord of the Dhamma, the Tathagata."

Chapter 22

The Five Spiritual Faculties

The practice of the Buddha's teaching is most commonly depicted by the image of a journey, the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path constituting the royal roadway along which the disciple must travel. The Buddhist scriptures, however, illustrate the quest for liberation in a variety of other ways, each of which throws a different spotlight on the nature of the practice. Although the alternative formulations inevitably draw upon the same basic set of mental factors as those that enter into the eightfold path, they structure these factors around a different "root metaphor" — an image which evokes its own particular range of associations and highlights different aspects of the endeavor to reach the cessation of suffering.

One of the groups of factors given special prominence in the Suttas included by the Buddha among the thirty-seven requisites of enlightenment is the five spiritual faculties: the faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. The term *indriya*, faculties, applied to this group as a whole is derived from the name of the ancient Vedic god Indra, ruler of the devas, and the term accordingly suggests the divine-like quality of control and domination. The five faculties are so designated because they exercise control in their own specific compartments of the spiritual life. As the god Indra vanquished the demons and attained supremacy among the gods, so each of the five faculties is called upon to subdue a particular mental disability and to marshal the corresponding potency of mind toward the breakthrough to final enlightenment.

The notion of faculty is partly akin to the ancient Greek conception of the virtues. Like the virtues, the faculties are active powers which coordinate and canalize our natural energies, directing them toward the achievement of an inward harmony and balance essential to our true happiness and peace. Since the faculties are to serve as agents of inward control, this implies that apart from their restraining influence our nature is not under our own control. Left to itself without the guidance of a superior source of instruction, the mind is a prey to forces that swell up from within itself, dark forces which hold us in subjection and prevent us from attaining our own highest welfare and genuine good. These forces are the defilements (*kilesa*). As long as we live and act under their dominion we are not our own masters but passive pawns, driven by our blind desires into courses of conduct that promise fulfillment but in the end lead only to misery and bondage. True freedom necessarily involves the attainment of inner autonomy, the strength to withstand the pushes and pulls of our appetites, and this is accomplished precisely by the development of the five spiritual faculties.

The qualities that exercise the function of faculties are of humble origin, appearing initially in mundane roles in the course of our everyday lives. In these humble guises they manifest as trustful confidence in higher values, as vigorous effort toward the good, as attentive awareness, as focused concentration, and as intelligent understanding. The Buddha's teaching does not implant these dispositions into the mind from scratch but harnesses those pre-existent capacities of our nature toward a supramundane goal — toward the realization of the Unconditioned — thereby conferring upon them a transcendental significance. By assigning them a task that reveals their immense potential, and by guiding them along a track that can bring that potential to fulfillment, the Dhamma transforms these commonplace mental factors into spiritual faculties, mighty instruments in the quest for liberation that can fathom the profoundest laws of existence and unlock the doors to the Deathless.

In the practice of the Dhamma each of these faculties has simultaneously to perform its own specific function and to harmonize with the other faculties to establish the balance needed for clear comprehension. The five come to fullest maturity in the contemplative development of insight, the direct road to awakening. In this process the faculty of faith provides the element of inspiration and aspiration which steers the mind away from the quagmire of doubt and settles it with serene trust in the Triple Gem as the supreme basis of deliverance. The faculty of energy kindles the fire of sustained endeavor that burns up obstructions and brings to maturity the factors that ripen in awakening. The faculty of mindfulness contributes clear awareness, the antidote to carelessness and the prerequisite of penetration. The faculty of concentration holds the beam of attention steadily focused on the rise and fall of bodily and mental events, calm and composed. And the faculty of wisdom, which the Buddha calls the crowning virtue among all the requisites of enlightenment, drives away the darkness of ignorance and lights up the true characteristics of phenomena.

Just as much as the five faculties, considered individually, each perform their own unique tasks in their respective domains, as a group they accomplish the collective task of establishing inner balance and harmony. To achieve this balanced striving the faculties are divided into two pairs in each of which each member must counter the undesirable tendency inherent in the other, thus enabling it to actualize its fullest potential. The faculties of faith and wisdom form one pair, aimed at balancing the capacities for devotion and comprehension; the faculties of energy and concentration form a second pair aimed at balancing the capacities for active exertion and calm recollection. Above the complementary pairs stands the faculty of mindfulness, which protects the mind from extremes and ensures that the members of each pair hold one another in a mutually restraining, mutually enriching tension.

Born of humble origins in everyday functions of the mind, through the Dhamma the five faculties acquire a transcendent destiny. When they are developed and regularly cultivated, says the Master, "they lead to the Deathless, are bound for the Deathless, culminate in the Deathless."

Chapter 23

The Guardians of the World

Like the Roman god Janus, every person faces simultaneously in two opposite directions. With one face of our consciousness we gaze in upon ourselves and become aware of ourselves as individuals motivated by a deep urge to avoid suffering and to secure our own well-being and happiness. With the other face we gaze out upon the world and discover that our lives are thoroughly relational, that we exist as nodes in a vast net of relationships with other beings whose fate is tied up with our own. Because of the relational structure of our existence, we are engaged in a perpetual two-way interaction with the world: the influence of the world presses in upon ourselves, shaping and altering our own attitudes and dispositions, while our own attitudes and dispositions flow out into the world, a force that affects the lives of others for better or for worse.

This seamless interconnection between the inner and outer domains acquires a particular urgency for us today owing to the rampant deterioration in ethical standards that sweeps across the globe. Such moral decline is as widespread in those societies which enjoy a comfortable measure of stability and prosperity as it is in those countries where poverty and desperation make moral infringements an integral aspect of the struggle for survival. Of course we should not indulge in pastel-colored fantasies about the past, imagining that we lived in a Garden of Eden until the invention of the steam engine. The driving forces of the human heart have remained fairly constant through the ages, and the toll they have taken in human misery surpasses calculation. But what we find today is a strange paradox that would be interesting if it were not sinister: while there appears to be a much wider verbal acknowledgment of the primacy of moral and human values, there is at the same time more blatant disregard for the lines of conduct such values imply. This undermining of traditional ethical values is in part a result of the internationalization of commerce and the global penetration of virtually all media of communication. Vested interests, in quest of wider loops of power and expanding profits, mount a sustained campaign aimed at exploiting our moral vulnerability. This campaign proceeds at full pace, invading every nook and corner of our lives, with little regard for the long-term consequences for the individual and society. The results are evident in the problems that we face, problems that respect no national boundaries: rising crime rates, spreading drug addiction, ecological devastation, child labor and prostitution, smuggling and pornography, the decline of the family as the unit of loving trust and moral education.

The Buddha's teaching at its core is a doctrine of liberation that provides us with the tools for cutting through the fetters that keep us bound to this world of suffering, the round of repeated births. Although the quest for liberation by practice of the Dhamma depends on individual effort, this quest necessarily takes place within a social environment and is thus subject to all the influences, helpful or harmful, imposed upon us by that environment. The Buddhist training unfolds in the three stages of morality, concentration and wisdom, each the foundation for the other: purified moral conduct facilitates the attainment of purified concentration, and the concentrated mind facilitates the attainment of liberating wisdom. The basis of the entire Buddhist training is thus purified conduct, and firm adherence to the code of training rules one has undertaken — the Five Precepts in the case of a lay Buddhist — is the necessary means for safeguarding the purity of one's conduct. Living as we do in an era when we are provoked through every available channel to deviate from the norms of rectitude, and when social unrest, economic hardships, and political conflict further fuel volatile emotions, the need for extra protection becomes especially imperative: protection for oneself, protection for the world.

The Buddha points to two mental qualities as the underlying safeguards of morality, thus as the protectors of both the individual and society as a whole. These two qualities are called in Pali *hiri* and *ottappa*. *Hiri* is an innate sense of shame over moral transgression; ottappa is moral dread, fear of the results of wrongdoing. The Buddha calls these two states the bright guardians of the world (*sukka lokapala*). He gives them this designation because as long as these two states prevail in people's hearts the moral standards of the world remain intact, while when their influence wanes the human world falls into unabashed promiscuity and violence, becoming almost indistinguishable from the animal realm (Itiv. 42).

While moral shame and fear of wrongdoing are united in the common task of protecting the mind from moral defilement, they differ in their individual characteristics and modes of operation. *Hiri*, the sense of shame, has

an internal reference; it is rooted in self-respect and induces us to shrink from wrongdoing out of a feeling of personal honor. *Ottappa*, fear of wrongdoing, has an external orientation. It is the voice of conscience that warns us of the dire consequences of moral transgression: blame and punishment by others, the painful kammic results of evil deeds, the impediment to our desire for liberation from suffering. Acariya Buddhaghosa illustrates the difference between the two with the simile of an iron rod smeared with excrement at one end and heated to a glow at the other end: *hiri* is like one's disgust at grabbing the rod in the place where it is smeared with excrement, *ottappa* is like one's fear of grabbing it in the place where it is red hot.

In the present-day world, with its secularization of all values, such notions as shame and fear of wrong are bound to appear antiquated, relics from a puritanical past when superstition and dogma manacled our rights to uninhibited self-expression. Yet the Buddha's stress on the importance of *hiri* and *ottappa* was based on a deep insight into the different potentialities of human nature. He saw that the path to deliverance is a struggle against the current, and that if we are to unfold the mind's capacities for wisdom, purity and peace, then we need to keep the powderkeg of the defilements under the watchful eyes of diligent sentinels.

The project of self-cultivation, which the Buddha proclaims as the means to liberation from suffering, requires that we keep a critical watch over the movements of our minds, both on occasions when they motivate bodily and verbal deeds and when they remain inwardly absorbed with their own preoccupations. To exercise such self-scrutiny is an aspect of heedfulness (*appamada*), which the Buddha states is the path to the Deathless. In the practice of self-examination, the sense of shame and fear of wrongdoing play a crucial role. The sense of shame spurs us to overcome unwholesome mental states because we recognize that such states are blemishes on our character. They detract from the inward loftiness of character to be fashioned by the practice of the Dhamma, the stature of the ariyans or noble ones, who shine resplendent like lotus flowers upon the lake of the world. Fear of wrongdoing bids us to retreat from morally risky thoughts and actions because we recognize that such deeds are seeds with the potency to yield fruits, fruits that inevitably will be bitter. The Buddha asserts that whatever evil arises springs from a lack of shame and fear of wrong, while all virtuous deeds spring from the sense of shame and fear of wrong.

By cultivating within ourselves the qualities of moral shame and fear of wrongdoing we not only accelerate our own progress along the path to deliverance, but also contribute our share toward the protection of the world. Given the intricate interconnections that hold between all living forms, to make the sense of shame and fear of wrong the guardians of our own minds is to make ourselves guardians of the world. As the roots of morality, these two qualities sustain the entire efficacy of the Buddha's liberating path; as the safeguards of personal decency, they at the same time preserve the dignity of the human race.

Chapter 24

Tolerance and Diversity

Today all the major religions of the world must respond to a double challenge. On one side is the challenge of secularism, a trend which has swept across the globe, battering against the most ancient strongholds of the sacred and turning all man's movements toward the Beyond into a forlorn gesture, poignant but devoid of sense. On the other side is the meeting of the great religions with each other. As the most far-flung nations and cultures merge into a single global community, the representatives of humankind's spiritual quest have been brought together in an encounter of unprecedented intimacy, an encounter so close that it leaves no room for retreat. Thus at one and the same time each major religion faces, in the amphitheater of world opinion, all the other religions of the earth, as well as the vast numbers of people who regard all claims to possess the Great Answer with a skeptical frown or an indifferent yawn.

In this situation, any religion which is to emerge as more than a relic from humanity's adolescence must be able to deal, in a convincing and meaningful manner, with both sides of the challenge. On the one hand it must contain the swelling tide of secularism, by keeping alive the intuition that no amount of technological mastery over external nature, no degree of proficiency in providing for humanity's mundane needs, can bring complete repose to the human spirit, can still the thirst for a truth and value that transcends the boundaries of contingency. On the other hand, each religion must find some way of disentangling the conflicting claims that all religions make to understand our place in the grand scheme of things and to hold the key to our salvation. While remaining faithful to its own most fundamental principles, a religion must be able to address the striking differences between its own tenets and those of other creeds, doing so in a manner that is at once honest yet humble, perspicacious yet unimposing.

In this brief essay I wish to sketch the outline of an appropriate Buddhist response to the second challenge. Since Buddhism has always professed to offer a "middle way" in resolving the intellectual and ethical dilemmas of the spiritual life, we may find that the key to our present problematic also lies in discovering the response that best exemplifies the middle way. As has often been noted, the middle way is not a compromise between the extremes but a way that rises above them, avoiding the pitfalls into which they lead. Therefore, in seeking the proper Buddhist approach to the problem of the diversity of creeds, we might begin by pinpointing the extremes which the middle way must avoid.

The first extreme is a retreat into fundamentalism, the adoption of an aggressive affirmation of one's own beliefs coupled with a proselytizing zeal toward those who still stand outside the chosen circle of one's co-religionists. While this response to the challenge of diversity has assumed alarming proportions in the folds of the great monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, it is not one toward which Buddhism has a ready affinity, for the ethical guidelines of the Dhamma naturally tend to foster an attitude of benign tolerance toward other religions and their followers. Though there is no guarantee against the rise of a militant fundamentalism from within Buddhism's own ranks, the Buddha's teachings can offer no sanctification, not even a remote one, for such a malignant development.

For Buddhists the more alluring alternative is the second extreme. This extreme, which purchases tolerance at the price of integrity, might be called the thesis of spiritual universalism: the view that all the great religions, at their core, espouse essentially the same truth, clothed merely in different modes of expression. Such a thesis could not, of course, be maintained in regard to the formal creeds of the major religions, which differ so widely that it would require a strenuous exercise in word-twisting to bring them into accord. The universalist position is arrived at instead by an indirect route. Its advocates argue that we must distinguish between the outward face of a religion — its explicit beliefs and exoteric practices — and its inner nucleus of experiential realization. On the basis of this distinction, they then insist, we will find that beneath the markedly different outward faces of the great religions, at their heart — in respect of the spiritual experiences from which they emerge and the ultimate goal to which they lead — they are substantially identical. Thus the major religions differ simply in so far as they are different means, different expedients, to the same liberative experience, which may be indiscriminately designated "enlightenment," or "redemption," or "God-realization," since these different terms

merely highlight different aspects of the same goal. As the famous maxim puts it: the roads up the mountain are many, but the moonlight at the top is one. From this point of view, the Buddha Dhamma is only one more variant on the "perennial philosophy" underlying all the mature expressions of man's spiritual quest. It may stand out by its elegant simplicity, its clarity and directness; but a unique and unrepeated revelation of truth it harbors not.

On first consideration the adoption of such a view may seem to be an indispensable stepping-stone to religious tolerance, and to insist that doctrinal differences are not merely verbal but real and important may appear to border on bigotry. Thus those who embrace Buddhism in reaction against the doctrinaire narrowness of the monotheistic religions may find in such a view — so soft and accommodating — a welcome respite from the insistence on privileged access to truth typical of those religions. However, an unbiased study of the Buddha's own discourses would show quite plainly that the universalist thesis does not have the endorsement of the Awakened One himself. To the contrary, the Buddha repeatedly proclaims that the path to the supreme goal of the holy life is made known only in his own teaching, and therefore that the attainment of that goal — final deliverance from suffering — can be achieved only from within his own dispensation. The best known instance of this claim is the Buddha's assertion, on the eve of his Parinibbana, that only in his dispensation are the four grades of enlightened persons to be found, that the other sects are devoid of true ascetics, those who have reached the planes of liberation.

The Buddha's restriction of final emancipation to his own dispensation does not spring from a narrow dogmatism or a lack of good will, but rests upon an utterly precise determination of the nature of the final goal and of the means that must be implemented to reach it. This goal is neither an everlasting afterlife in a heaven nor some nebulously conceived state of spiritual illumination, but the Nibbana element with no residue remaining, release from the cycle of repeated birth and death. This goal is effected by the utter destruction of the mind's defilements — greed, aversion and delusion — all the way down to their subtlest levels of latency. The eradication of the defilements can be achieved only by insight into the true nature of phenomena, which means that the attainment of Nibbana depends upon the direct experiential insight into all conditioned phenomena, internal and external, as stamped with the "three characteristics of existence": impermanence, suffering, and non-selfness. What the Buddha maintains, as the ground for his assertion that his teaching offers the sole means to final release from suffering, is that the knowledge of the true nature of phenomena, in its exactitude and completeness, is accessible only in his teaching. This is so because, theoretically, the principles that define this knowledge are unique to his teaching and contradictory in vital respects to the basic tenets of other creeds; and because, practically, this teaching alone reveals, in its perfection and purity, the means of generating this liberative knowledge as a matter of immediate personal experience. This means is the Noble Eightfold Path which, as an integrated system of spiritual training, cannot be found outside the dispensation of a Fully Enlightened One.

Surprisingly, this exclusivistic stance of Buddhism in regard to the prospects for final emancipation has never engendered a policy of intolerance on the part of Buddhists toward the adherents of other religions. To the contrary, throughout its long history, Buddhism has displayed a thoroughgoing tolerance and genial good will toward the many religions with which it has come into contact. It has maintained this tolerance simultaneously with its deep conviction that the doctrine of the Buddha offers the unique and unsurpassable way to release from the ills inherent in conditioned existence. For Buddhism, religious tolerance is not achieved by reducing all religions to a common denominator, nor by explaining away formidable differences in thought and practice as accidents of historical development. From the Buddhist point of view, to make tolerance contingent upon whitewashing discrepancies would not be to exercise genuine tolerance at all; for such an approach can "tolerate" differences only by diluting them so completely that they no longer make a difference. True tolerance in religion involves the capacity to admit differences as real and fundamental, even as profound and unbridgeable, yet at the same time to respect the rights of those who follow a religion different from one's own (or no religion at all) to continue to do so without resentment, disadvantage or hindrance.

Buddhist tolerance springs from the recognition that the dispositions and spiritual needs of human beings are too vastly diverse to be encompassed by any single teaching, and thus that these needs will naturally find expression in a wide variety of religious forms. The non-Buddhist systems will not be able to lead their adherents to the final goal of the Buddha's Dhamma, but that they never proposed to do in the first place. For Buddhism, acceptance of the idea of the beginningless round of rebirths implies that it would be utterly unrealistic to expect more than a small number of people to be drawn toward a spiritual path aimed at complete liberation. The overwhelming majority, even of those who seek deliverance from earthly woes, will aim at securing a favorable mode of existence within the round, even while misconceiving this to be the ultimate goal of the religious quest.

To the extent that a religion proposes sound ethical principles and can promote to some degree the development of wholesome qualities such as love, generosity, detachment and compassion, it will merit in this respect the approbation of Buddhists. These principles advocated by outside religious systems will also conduce to rebirth in the realms of bliss — the heavens and the divine abodes. Buddhism by no means claims to have unique access to these realms, but holds that the paths that lead to them have been articulated, with varying degrees of clarity, in many of the great spiritual traditions of humanity. While the Buddhist will disagree with the belief

structures of other religions to the extent that they deviate from the Buddha's Dhamma, he will respect them to the extent that they enjoin virtues and standards of conduct that promote spiritual development and the harmonious integration of human beings with each other and with the world.

Chapter 25

From Views to Vision

The Buddha's teaching repeatedly cautions us about the dangers in clinging — in clinging to possessions, clinging to pleasures, clinging to people, clinging to views. The Buddha sounds such words of warning because he discerns in clinging a potent cause of suffering, and he thus advises us that the price we must pay to arrive at the "far shore" of liberation is the relinquishment of every type of clinging. In a move that at first glance may even seem self-destructive on the part of a religious founder, the Buddha says that we should not cling even to his teachings, that even the wholesome principles of the Dhamma have to be treated like the makeshift raft used to carry us across the stream.

Such astringent words of advice can easily be misconstrued, and if misconstrued the consequences may be even more bitter than if we simply disregard them. One particular misinterpretation into which newcomers to the Dhamma (and some veterans too!) are especially prone to fall is to hold that the Buddha's counsel to transcend all views means that even the doctrines of Buddhism are ultimately of no vital importance. For these doctrines too, it is said, are merely views, intellectual constructs, filaments of thought, which may have been meaningful in the context of ancient Indian cosmology but have no binding claims on us today. After all, aren't the words and phrases of the Buddhist texts simply that — words and phrases — and aren't we admonished to get beyond words and phrases in order to arrive at direct experience, the only thing that really counts? And doesn't the Buddha enjoin us in the Kalama Sutta to judge things for ourselves and to let our own experience be the criterion for deciding what we will accept?

Such an approach to the Dhamma may be sweet to chew upon and easy to digest, but we also need to beware of its effect upon our total spiritual organism. Too often this kind of slippery reasoning provides simply a convenient excuse for adhering, at a subtle level of the mind, to ideas which are fundamentally antithetical to the Dhamma. We hang on to such ideas, not because they are truly edifying, but in order to protect ourselves from the radical challenge with which the Buddha's message confronts us. In effect, such claims, though apparently aimed at safeguarding living experience from the encroachment of stodgy intellectualism, may be in reality a clever intellectual ploy for refusing to examine cherished assumptions — assumptions we cherish primarily because they shield deep-rooted desires we do not want to expose to the tonic influence of the Dhamma.

When we approach the Buddha's teachings, we should bear in mind that its vast array of doctrines have not been devised as elaborate exercises in philosophical sleight of hand. They are propounded because they constitute right view, and right view stands at the head of the Noble Eightfold Path, the chisel to be used to cut away the dross of wrong views and confused thoughts that impede the light of wisdom from illumining our minds. In the present-day world, far more than in the ancient Ganges Valley, wrong views have gained widespread currency and assumed more baneful forms than earlier epochs ever could have imagined. Today they are no longer the province of a few eccentric philosophers and their cliques. They have become, rather, a major determinant of cultural and social attitudes, a molder of the moral spirit of the age, a driving force behind economic empires and international relations. Under such circumstances, right view is our candle against the dark, our compass in the desert, our isle above the flood. Without a clear understanding of the truths enunciated by right view, and without a keen awareness of the areas where these truths collide with popular opinion, it is only too easy to stumble in the dark, to get stranded among the sand dunes, to be swept away from one's position above the deluge.

Both right view and wrong view, though cognitive in character, do not remain locked up in a purely cognitive space of their own. Our views exercise an enormously potent influence upon all areas of our lives, and the Buddha, in his genius, recognized this when he placed right view and wrong view respectively at the beginning of the good and evil pathways of life. Views flow out and interlock with the practical dimension of our lives at many levels: they determine our values, they give birth to our goals and aspirations, they guide our choices in morally difficult dilemmas. Wrong view promotes wrong intentions, wrong modes of conduct, leads us in pursuit of a deceptive type of freedom. It draws us toward the freedom of license, by which we feel justified in casting off

moral restraint for the sake of satisfying transient but harmful impulses. Though we may then pride ourselves on our spontaneity and creativity, may convince ourselves that we have discovered our true individuality, one with clear sight will see that this freedom is only a more subtle bondage to the chains of craving and delusion.

Right view, even in its elementary form, as a recognition of the moral law of kamma, the capacity of our deeds to bring results, becomes our gentle guide toward true freedom. And when it matures into an accurate grasp of the three signs of existence, of dependent arising, of the Four Noble Truths, it then becomes our navigator up the mountain slope of final deliverance. It will lead us to right intentions, to virtuous conduct, to mental purification, and to the cloudless peak of unobstructed vision. Although we must eventually learn to let go of this guide in order to stand confidently on our own feet, without its astute eye and willing hand we would only meander in the foothills oblivious to the peak.

The attainment of right view is not simply a matter of assenting to a particular roster of doctrinal formulas or of skill in juggling an impressive array of cryptic Pali terms. The attainment of right view is at its core essentially a matter of understanding — of understanding in a deeply personal way the vital truths of existence upon which our lives devolve. Right view aims at the big picture. It seeks to comprehend our place in the total scheme of things and to discern the laws that govern the unfolding of our lives for better or for worse. The ground of right view is the Perfect Enlightenment of the Buddha, and by striving to rectify our view we seek nothing less than to align our own understanding of the nature of existence with that of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Right view may begin with concepts and propositional knowledge but it does not end with them. Through study, deep reflection and meditative development it gradually becomes transmuted into wisdom, the wisdom of insight that can cut asunder the beginningless fetters of the mind.

Chapter 26

Association with the Wise

The Maha-mangala Sutta, the Great Discourse on Blessings, is one of the most popular Buddhist suttas, included in all the standard repertories of Pali devotional chants. The sutta begins when a deity of stunning beauty, having descended to earth in the stillness of the night, approaches the Blessed One in the Jeta Grove and asks about the way to the highest blessings. In the very first stanza of his reply the Buddha states that the highest blessing comes from avoiding fools and associating with the wise (*asevana ca balanam, panditanan ca sevana*). Since the rest of the sutta goes on to sketch all the different aspects of human felicity, both mundane and spiritual, the assignment of association with the wise to the opening stanza serves to emphasize a key point: that progress along the path of the Dhamma hinges on making the right choices in our friendships.

Contrary to certain psychological theories, the human mind is not a hermetically sealed chamber enclosing a personality unalterably shaped by biology and infantile experience. Rather, throughout life it remains a highly malleable entity continually remolding itself in response to its social interactions. Far from coming to our personal relationships with a fixed and immutable character, our regular and repeated social contacts implicate us in a constant process of psychological osmosis that offers precious opportunities for growth and transformation. Like living cells engaged in a chemical dialogue with their colleagues, our minds transmit and receive a steady barrage of messages and suggestions that may work profound changes even at levels below the threshold of awareness.

Particularly critical to our spiritual progress is our selection of friends and companions, who can have the most decisive impact upon our personal destiny. It is because he perceived how susceptible our minds can be to the influence of our companions that the Buddha repeatedly stressed the value of good friendship (*kalyanamittata*) in the spiritual life. The Buddha states that he sees no other thing that is so much responsible for the arising of unwholesome qualities in a person as bad friendship, nothing so helpful for the arising of wholesome qualities as good friendship (AN 1.vii,10; I.viii,1). Again, he says that he sees no other external factor that leads to so much harm as bad friendship, and no other external factor that leads to so much benefit as good friendship (AN 1.x,13,14). It is through the influence of a good friend that a disciple is led along the Noble Eightfold Path to release from all suffering (SN 45:2).

Good friendship, in Buddhism, means considerably more than associating with people that one finds amenable and who share one's interests. It means in effect seeking out wise companions to whom one can look for guidance and instruction. The task of the noble friend is not only to provide companionship in the treading of the way. The truly wise and compassionate friend is one who, with understanding and sympathy of heart, is ready to criticize and admonish, to point out one's faults, to exhort and encourage, perceiving that the final end of such friendship is growth in the Dhamma. The Buddha succinctly expresses the proper response of a disciple to such a good friend in a verse of the Dhammapada: "If one finds a person who points out one's faults and who reproves one, one should follow such a wise and sagacious counselor as one would a guide to hidden treasure" (Dhp. 76).

Association with the wise becomes so crucial to spiritual development because the example and advice of a noble-minded counselor is often the decisive factor that awakens and nurtures the unfolding of our own untapped spiritual potential. The uncultivated mind harbors a vast diversity of unrealized possibilities, ranging from the depths of selfishness, egotism and aggressivity to the heights of wisdom, self-sacrifice and compassion. The task confronting us, as followers of the Dhamma, is to keep the unwholesome tendencies in check and to foster the growth of the wholesome tendencies, the qualities that lead to awakening, to freedom and purification. However, our internal tendencies do not mature and decline in a vacuum. They are subject to the constant impact of the broader environment, and among the most powerful of these influences is the company we keep, the people we look upon as teachers, advisors and friends. Such people silently speak to the hidden potentials of our own being, potentials that will either unfold or wither under their influence.

In our pursuit of the Dhamma it therefore becomes essential for us to choose as our guides and companions those who represent, at least in part, the noble qualities we seek to internalize by the practice of the Dhamma.

This is especially necessary in the early stages of our spiritual development, when our virtuous aspirations are still fresh and tender, vulnerable to being undermined by inward irresolution or by discouragement from acquaintances who do not share our ideals. In this early phase our mind resembles a chameleon, which alters its color according to its background. Just as this remarkable lizard turns green when in the grass and brown when on the ground, so we become fools when we associate with fools and sages when we associate with sages. Internal changes do not generally occur suddenly; but slowly, by increments so slight that we ourselves may not be aware of them, our characters undergo a metamorphosis that in the end may prove to be dramatically significant.

If we associate closely with those who are addicted to the pursuit of sense pleasures, power, riches and fame, we should not imagine that we will remain immune from those addictions: in time our own minds will gradually incline to these same ends. If we associate closely with those who, while not given up to moral recklessness, live their lives comfortably adjusted to mundane routines, we too will remain stuck in the ruts of the commonplace. If we aspire for the highest — for the peaks of transcendent wisdom and liberation — then we must enter into association with those who represent the highest. Even if we are not so fortunate as to find companions who have already scaled the heights, we can well count ourselves blessed if we cross paths with a few spiritual friends who share our ideals and who make earnest efforts to nurture the noble qualities of the Dhamma in their hearts.

When we raise the question how to recognize good friends, how to distinguish good advisors from bad advisors, the Buddha offers us crystal-clear advice. In the Shorter Discourse on a Full-Moon Night (MN 110) he explains the difference between the companionship of the bad person and the companionship of the good person. The bad person chooses as friends and companions those who are without faith, whose conduct is marked by an absence of shame and moral dread, who have no knowledge of spiritual teachings, who are lazy and unmindful, and who are devoid of wisdom. As a consequence of choosing such bad friends as his advisors, the bad person plans and acts for his own harm, for the harm of others, and the harm of both, and he meets with sorrow and misery.

In contrast, the Buddha continues, the good person chooses as friends and companions those who have faith, who exhibit a sense of shame and moral dread, who are learned in the Dhamma, energetic in cultivation of the mind, mindful, and possessed of wisdom. Resorting to such good friends, looking to them as mentors and guides, the good person pursues these same qualities as his own ideals and absorbs them into his character. Thus, while drawing ever closer to deliverance himself, he becomes in turn a beacon light for others. Such a one is able to offer those who still wander in the dark an inspiring model to emulate, and a wise friend to turn to for guidance and advice.

Chapter 27

Dhamma and Non-duality

One of the most challenging issues facing Theravada Buddhism in recent years has been the encounter between classical Theravada vipassana meditation and the "non-dualistic" contemplative traditions best represented by Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. Responses to this encounter have spanned the extremes, ranging from vehement confrontation all the way to attempts at synthesis and hybridization. While the present essay cannot pretend to illuminate all the intricate and subtle problems involved in this sometimes volatile dialogue, I hope it may contribute a few sparks of light from a canonically oriented Theravada perspective.

My first preliminary remark would be to insist that a system of meditative practice does not constitute a self-contained discipline. Any authentic system of spiritual practice is always found embedded within a conceptual matrix that defines the problems the practice is intended to solve and the goal toward which it is directed. Hence the merging of techniques grounded in incompatible conceptual frameworks is fraught with risk. Although such mergers may appease a predilection for experimentation or eclecticism, it seems likely that their long-term effect will be to create a certain "cognitive dissonance" that will reverberate through the deeper levels of the psyche and stir up even greater confusion.

My second remark would be to point out simply that non-dualistic spiritual traditions are far from consistent with each other, but comprise, rather, a wide variety of views profoundly different and inevitably colored by the broader conceptual contours of the philosophies which encompass them.

For the Vedanta, non-duality (*advaita*) means the absence of an ultimate distinction between the Atman, the innermost self, and Brahman, the divine reality, the underlying ground of the world. From the standpoint of the highest realization, only one ultimate reality exists — which is simultaneously Atman and Brahman — and the aim of the spiritual quest is to know that one's own true self, the Atman, is the timeless reality which is Being, Awareness, Bliss. Since all schools of Buddhism reject the idea of the Atman, none can accept the non-dualism of Vedanta. From the perspective of the Theravada tradition, any quest for the discovery of selfhood, whether as a permanent individual self or as an absolute universal self, would have to be dismissed as a delusion, a metaphysical blunder born from a failure to properly comprehend the nature of concrete experience. According to the Pali Suttas, the individual being is merely a complex unity of the five aggregates, which are all stamped with the three marks of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Any postulation of selfhood in regard to this compound of transient, conditioned phenomena is an instance of "personality view" (*sakkayaditthi*), the most basic fetter that binds beings to the round of rebirths. The attainment of liberation, for Buddhism, does not come to pass by the realization of a true self or absolute "I," but through the dissolution of even the subtlest sense of selfhood in relation to the five aggregates, "the abolition of all I-making, mine-making, and underlying tendencies to conceit."

The Mahayana schools, despite their great differences, concur in upholding a thesis that, from the Theravada point of view, borders on the outrageous. This is the claim that there is no ultimate difference between samsara and Nirvana, defilement and purity, ignorance and enlightenment. For the Mahayana, the enlightenment which the Buddhist path is designed to awaken consists precisely in the realization of this non-dualistic perspective. The validity of conventional dualities is denied because the ultimate nature of all phenomena is emptiness, the lack of any substantial or intrinsic reality, and hence in their emptiness all the diverse, apparently opposed phenomena posited by mainstream Buddhist doctrine finally coincide: "All dharmas have one nature, which is no-nature."

The teaching of the Buddha as found in the Pali canon does not endorse a philosophy of non-dualism of any variety, nor, I would add, can a non-dualistic perspective be found lying implicit within the Buddha's discourses. At the same time, however, I would not maintain that the Pali Suttas propose *dualism*, the positing of duality as a metaphysical hypothesis aimed at intellectual assent. I would characterize the Buddha's intent in the Canon as primarily pragmatic rather than speculative, though I would also qualify this by saying that this pragmatism does not operate in a philosophical void but finds its grounding in the nature of actuality as the Buddha penetrated it in his enlightenment. In contrast to the non-dualistic systems, the Buddha's approach

does not aim at the discovery of a unifying principle behind or beneath our experience of the world. Instead it takes the concrete fact of living experience, with all its buzzing confusion of contrasts and tensions, as its starting point and framework, within which it attempts to diagnose the central problem at the core of human existence and to offer a way to its solution. Hence the polestar of the Buddhist path is not a final unity but the extinction of suffering, which brings the resolution of the existential dilemma at its most fundamental level.

When we investigate our experience exactly as it presents itself, we find that it is permeated by a number of critically important dualities with profound implications for the spiritual quest. The Buddha's teaching, as recorded in the Pali Suttas, fixes our attention unflinchingly upon these dualities and treats their acknowledgment as the indispensable basis for any honest search for liberating wisdom. It is precisely these antitheses — of good and evil, suffering and happiness, wisdom and ignorance — that make the quest for enlightenment and deliverance such a vitally crucial concern.

At the peak of the pairs of opposites stands the duality of the conditioned and the Unconditioned: samsara as the round of repeated birth and death wherein all is impermanent, subject to change, and liable to suffering, and Nibbana as the state of final deliverance, the unborn, ageless, and deathless. Although Nibbana, even in the early texts, is definitely cast as an ultimate reality and not merely as an ethical or psychological state, there is not the least insinuation that this reality is metaphysically indistinguishable at some profound level from its manifest opposite, samsara. To the contrary, the Buddha's repeated lesson is that samsara is the realm of suffering governed by greed, hatred, and delusion, wherein we have shed tears greater than the waters of the ocean, while Nibbana is irreversible release from samsara, to be attained by demolishing greed, hatred, and delusion, and by relinquishing all conditioned existence.

Thus the Theravada makes the antithesis of samsara and Nibbana the starting point of the entire quest for deliverance. Even more, it treats this antithesis as determinative of the final goal, which is precisely the transcendence of samsara and the attainment of liberation in Nibbana. Where Theravada differs significantly from the Mahayana schools, which also start with the duality of samsara and Nirvana, is in its refusal to regard this polarity as a mere preparatory lesson tailored for those with blunt faculties, to be eventually superseded by some higher realization of non-duality. From the standpoint of the Pali Suttas, even for the Buddha and the arahants suffering and its cessation, samsara and Nibbana, remain distinct.

Spiritual seekers still exploring the different contemplative traditions commonly assume that the highest spiritual teaching must be one which posits a metaphysical unity as the philosophical foundation and final goal of the quest for enlightenment. Taking this assumption to be axiomatic, they may then conclude that the Pali Buddhist teaching, with its insistence on the sober assessment of dualities, is deficient or provisional, requiring fulfillment by a nondualistic realization. For those of such a bent, the dissolution of dualities in a final unity will always appear more profound and complete.

However, it is just this assumption that I would challenge. I would assert, by reference to the Buddha's own original teaching, that profundity and completeness need not be bought at the price of distinctions, that they can be achieved at the highest level while preserving intact the dualities and diversity so strikingly evident to mature reflection on the world. I would add, moreover, that the teaching which insists on recognizing real dualities as they are is finally more satisfactory. The reason it is more satisfactory, despite its denial of the mind's yearning for a comprehensive unity, is because it takes account of another factor which overrides in importance the quest for unity. This "something else" is the need to remain grounded in actuality.

Where I think the teaching of the Buddha, as preserved in the Theravada tradition, surpasses all other attempts to resolve the spiritual dilemmas of humanity is in its persistent refusal to sacrifice actuality for unity. The Buddha's Dhamma does not point us toward an all-embracing absolute in which the tensions of daily existence dissolve in metaphysical oneness or inscrutable emptiness. It points us, rather, toward actuality as the final sphere of comprehension, toward things as they really are (*yathabhuta*). Above all, it points us toward the Four Noble Truths of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way to its cessation as the liberating proclamation of things as they really are. These four truths, the Buddha declares, are noble truths, and what makes them noble truths is precisely that they are actual, undeviating, invariable (*tatha, avitatha, anannatha*). It is the failure to face the actuality of these truths that has caused us to wander for so long through the long course of samsara. It is by penetrating these truths exactly as they are that one can reach the true consummation of the spiritual quest: making an end to suffering.

In this sequel to the previous essay, I intend to discuss three major areas of difference between the Buddha's Teaching, which we may refer to here as "the Ariyan Dhamma," and the philosophies of non-duality. These areas correspond to the three divisions of the Buddhist path — virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

In regard to *virtue* the distinction between the two teachings is not immediately evident, as both generally affirm the importance of virtuous conduct at the start of training. The essential difference between them emerges, not at the outset, but only later, in the way they evaluate the role of morality in the advanced stages of the path. For the non-dual systems, all dualities are finally transcended in the realization of the non-dual reality, the Absolute or fundamental ground. As the Absolute encompasses and transcends all diversity, for one who has realized it the distinctions between good and evil, virtue and non-virtue, lose their ultimate validity. Such distinctions, it is said, are valid only at the conventional level, not at the level of final realization; they

are binding on the trainee, not on the adept. Thus we find that in their historical forms (particularly in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra), philosophies of non-duality hold that the conduct of the enlightened sage cannot be circumscribed by moral rules. The sage has transcended all conventional distinctions of good and evil. He acts spontaneously from his intuition of the Ultimate and therefore is no longer bound by the rules of morality valid for those still struggling toward the light. His behavior is an elusive, incomprehensible outflow of what has been called "crazy wisdom."

For the Ariyan Dhamma, the distinction between the two types of conduct, moral and immoral, is sharp and clear, and this distinction persists all the way through to the consummation of the path: "Bodily conduct is twofold, I say, to be cultivated and not to be cultivated, and such conduct is either the one or the other" (MN 114). The conduct of the ideal Buddhist sage, the arahant, necessarily embodies the highest standards of moral rectitude *both* in the spirit *and* in the letter, and for him conformity to the letter is spontaneous and natural. The Buddha says that the liberated one lives restrained by the rules of the Vinaya, seeing danger in the slightest faults. He cannot intentionally commit any breach of the moral precepts, nor would he ever pursue any course of action motivated by desire, hatred, delusion, or fear.

In the sphere of *meditation practice* or concentration, we again find a striking difference in outlook between the non-dual systems and the Ariyan Dhamma. Since, for the non-dual systems, distinctions are ultimately unreal, meditation practice is not explicitly oriented toward the removal of mental defilements and the cultivation of virtuous states of mind. In these systems, it is often said that defilements are mere appearances devoid of intrinsic reality, even manifestations of the Absolute. Hence to engage in a programme of practice to overcome them is an exercise in futility, like fleeing from an apparitional demon: to seek to eliminate defilements is to reinforce the illusion of duality. The meditative themes that ripple through the non-dual currents of thought declare: "no defilement and no purity"; "the defilements are in essence the same as transcendent wisdom"; "it is by passion that passion is removed."

In the Ariyan Dhamma, the practice of meditation unfolds from start to finish as a process of mental purification. The process begins with the recognition of the dangers in unwholesome states: they are real pollutants of our being that need to be restrained and eliminated. The consummation is reached in the complete destruction of the defilements through the cultivation of their wholesome antidotes. The entire course of practice demands a recognition of the differences between the dark and bright qualities of the mind, and devolves on effort and diligence: "One does not tolerate an arisen unwholesome thought, one abandons it, dispels it, abolishes it, nullifies it" (MN 2). The hindrances are "causes of blindness, causes of ignorance, destructive to wisdom, not conducive to Nibbana" (SN 46:40). The practice of meditation purges the mind of its corruptions, preparing the way for the destruction of the cankers (*asavakkhaya*).

Finally, in the domain of *wisdom* the Ariyan Dhamma and the non-dual systems once again move in contrary directions. In the non-dual systems the task of wisdom is to break through the diversified appearances (or the appearance of diversity) in order to discover the unifying reality that underlies them. Concrete phenomena, in their distinctions and their plurality, are mere appearance, while true reality is the One: either a substantial Absolute (the Atman, Brahman, the Godhead, etc.), or a metaphysical zero (Sunyata, the Void Nature of Mind, etc.). For such systems, liberation comes with the arrival at the fundamental unity in which opposites merge and distinctions evaporate like dew.

In the Ariyan Dhamma wisdom aims at seeing and knowing things as they really are (*yathabhutananadassana*). Hence, to know things as they are, wisdom must respect phenomena in their precise particularity. Wisdom leaves diversity and plurality untouched. It instead seeks to uncover the characteristics of phenomena, to gain insight into their qualities and structures. It moves, not in the direction of an all-embracing identification with the All, but toward disengagement and detachment, release from the All. The cultivation of wisdom in no way "undermines" concrete phenomena by reducing them to appearances, nor does it treat them as windows opening to some fundamental ground. Instead it investigates and discerns, in order to understand things as they are: "And what does one understand as it really is? One understands: Such is form, such its arising and passing away. Such is feeling... perception... formations... consciousness, such its arising and passing away." "When one sees, 'All formations are impermanent, all are suffering, everything is not self,' one turns away from suffering: this is the path to purity."

Spiritual systems are colored as much by their favorite similes as by their formulated tenets. For the non-dual systems, two similes stand out as predominant. One is space, which simultaneously encompasses all and permeates all yet is nothing concrete in itself; the other is the ocean, which remains self-identical beneath the changing multitude of its waves. The similes used within the Ariyan Dhamma are highly diverse, but one theme that unites many of them is acuity of vision — vision which discerns the panorama of visible forms clearly and precisely, each in its own individuality: "It is just as if there were a lake in a mountain recess, clear, limpid, undisturbed, so that a man with good sight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting. He might think: 'There is this lake, clear, limpid, undisturbed, and there are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and resting.' So too a monk understands as it actually is: 'This is suffering, this is the origin of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' When he knows and sees thus his mind is

liberated from the cankers, and with the mind's liberation he knows that he is liberated" (MN 39).

Chapter 28

For the Welfare of Many

In the hour before dawn on Wednesday, 19th October 1994, our esteemed Founding-President and Patron, Venerable Nyanaponika Mahathera, passed away peacefully at his residence, the Forest Hermitage in the Udawattakele Reserve, Kandy. His death took place on the last day of the Vassa, the annual rains retreat observed by Buddhist monks since the days of the Buddha, in the quiet of the forest he loved so much, before the screeching of the fruit bats and the chatter of the monkeys could herald the approach of dawn. Three months earlier Ven. Nyanaponika had celebrated his 93rd birthday, frail but still in remarkably good health for his advanced age. In late August, however, the wheel of aging accelerated rapidly, ushering in a combination of illnesses that ended two months later in his demise.

The passing away of Ven. Nyanaponika marks the end of an era, both in the annals of the Western encounter with Buddhism and in the history of the BPS. Among Western Buddhists he was perhaps the last survivor of what might be called the "second generation" of pioneers, comprising those who forged their initial contacts with the Dhamma during the 1920s and 1930s. Ordained as a pupil of the illustrious German elder Ven. Nyanatiloka Mahathera in 1936, Ven. Nyanaponika was for decades the seniormost Theravada Buddhist monk of Western origin in the world. On the day of his death he had just completed his 57th rains as a member of the Sangha. He was also one of the four "Great Mentors, Ornaments of the Teaching" (*maha mahopadhyaya sasanasobhana*) in the Amarapura Nikaya, the monastic fraternity to which he belonged.

Through his own writings and in his editorship of the BPS, Ven. Nyanaponika played a momentous role in shaping the expression of Theravada Buddhism appropriate for the latter half of the twentieth century. Gifted with keen intelligence, a profound grasp of the Dhamma, and extraordinary sensitivity to the needs of his fellow human beings, he endeavored both in his personal writings and in his publication policy to articulate a vision of the Buddha's teachings that underscored its crucial relevance to humanity in the present age. The early decades of the century provided the background to this vision. In his own mature years he had witnessed two world wars (one involving the mass extermination of his own ancestral people, the European Jews), countless small-scale social conflicts, and the breakdown of existential meaning in the lives of so many thoughtful, well-intentioned people. Against this background he constantly sought to emphasize, from different angles, those aspects of the Buddha's teachings that speak most directly and meaningfully to men and women earnestly searching for clear spiritual direction. His writings, though sparse and compact in expression, constitute a veritable "Guide for the Perplexed" in this age of confusion when it often seems that the only alternative to rampant materialism and religious fundamentalism is the bewildering potpourri of cults and fads that make up the spiritual supermarket.

Ven. Nyanaponika did not pursue his aim of sharing the Dhamma by sweetening and diluting the original doctrine in order to make it more palatable. His interpretations of the Dhamma always flowed from a clear personal discernment of its innermost essence — the Four Noble Truths and the three characteristics — and were built upon a solid respect for the commentarial tradition that has come down from the ancient elders. He based his writings, not only upon sound and thorough scholarship, but also upon a penetrative understanding of the human condition rooted in a deep sympathy with his fellow human beings. Hence his books and essays go far beyond the repetition of stale, stereotyped formulations of the teaching. They refract the Dhamma through the prism of a highly astute Western mind shaped by the best qualities of the European intellectual heritage, presenting it in a way intended to teach, to transform, and to edify his readers at the very core of their being.

His appreciation of the Buddha's teachings was as comprehensive as it was profound, as vitally direct as it was systematic and orderly. In his view the Dhamma offers a sublime ethics that can provide a psychological basis for morality in place of a theological one. He found the teaching fully acceptable to the most critical demands of rational thought, yet capable of providing sustenance for the nourishment of our emotional life, so badly impoverished by scientific objectivism and economic consumerism. Above all, he stressed the importance of self-knowledge and inner self-transformation and the role of Buddhist meditation as a means for knowing, developing, and liberating the mind. His book *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, translated into seven languages, still remains today, after 33 years, the clearest, most thorough, and most convincing contemporary account of the

Buddha's way of mindfulness.

The supreme expression of Ven. Nyanaponika's endeavor to share the Dhamma with others was his commitment to the work of the BPS, which he helped to found and served as its first Secretary, first President, and longtime Editor. From the inception of the BPS in 1958, Ven. Nyanaponika dedicated himself completely to the work of the Society. During the first three years of its life, in fact, the Society was quartered entirely in his study at the Forest Hermitage. During this period he himself personally shouldered a large portion of the routine paperwork, though he soon divested himself of this when Richard Abeyasekera assumed the position of General Secretary, leaving him more time to attend to the editorial side.

As Editor, he carefully examined every manuscript to ensure that BPS publications accurately reflect the spirit of the original Buddhist teachings. It was above all his sagacious guidance, his overflowing compassion, and his dedication to the Dhamma that transformed the BPS into a major Buddhist publisher bringing the teachings of the Buddha to over eighty countries around the world. Even after his retirement from the editorship (in 1984) and from the presidency (in 1988), as our Patron he continued to take an active interest in the Society's development. We always apprised him of any important decision or line of policy that required consideration, and he was always ready to offer his wise advice.

On a personal note I must state that with the passing of Ven. Nyanaponika I have lost my life's closest friend, my teacher and spiritual guide. The last ten years, during which I had the privilege to live with him and to look after him at the Forest Hermitage, were indeed a blessing hard to encounter in the round of rebirths. Yet, although we shall miss his wise and loving presence, his subtle humor and sympathetic counsel, it is not sorrow and grief that we should feel at his parting, but rather a serene joy over a noble character that embodied the most worthy human traits, and immense gratitude for a life supremely well lived for the welfare and happiness of many. By the vast merits of his life's achievements, may Ven. Nyanaponika be able to pursue his aspiration unhindered in future existences and may he attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana.

Chapter 29

Toward a Threshold of Understanding

Pope John Paul II's recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, is a collection of reflections primarily on issues of Christian faith, but the book also features the Pope's assessment of other religions, including a short chapter on Buddhism. The Pontiff's words in this chapter are far from appreciative. The release of the book in Sri Lanka on the eve of the Pope's visit to this country this past January stirred up waves of indignation in the Buddhist community that spread as far as the Vatican. The Buddhist prelates announced that they would not attend an inter-religious meeting requested by the Pope unless he formally retracted his unfavorable remarks about Buddhism. Although on arrival the Pope tried to appease the feelings of Buddhist leaders by declaring his esteem for their religion, even quoting the Dhammapada, he fell short of proffering a full apology, and this did not satisfy the Sangha elders.

The following essay is intended as a short corrective to the Pope's demeaning characterization of Buddhism. It addresses the issues solely at the level of ideas, without delving into the question whether ulterior motives lay behind the Pope's pronouncements. The essay is based on an article written for a Polish publisher, Source (Katowice), which is presently compiling a book on the Buddhist response to the Pope's book.

The Pope states that "the Buddhist tradition and the methods deriving from it have an almost exclusively negative soteriology (doctrine of salvation)." Such a view of the Buddhist teachings was widespread among Christian missionaries in Asia during the 19th century, serving to justify their evangelical incursions into the heartlands of Buddhism. Serious scholars of comparative religion have long recognized this view to be a misrepresentation, rooted, in the case of the early missionaries, partly in misunderstanding, partly in deliberate distortion. It is therefore puzzling that the present head of the Catholic Church, otherwise so well informed, should repeat these worn-out lines, particularly at a time when greater mutual understanding is expected from the leaders of different religions.

The Pope does not explain exactly why he regards Buddhist soteriology as negative. Most likely, he takes this view because the Buddhist path of deliverance does not recognize a personal God as the agent and end of salvation. Like beauty, however, what is negative and what is positive lies in the eye of the beholder, and what is negative for one may turn out to be another's supreme ideal. If one seeks an everlasting union between one's eternal soul and a creator God, then a doctrine that denies the existence of an eternal soul and a Divine Creator will inevitably appear negative. If one regards everything conditioned as impermanent and devoid of self, and seeks deliverance in Nibbana, the Deathless Element, then a doctrine of everlasting union between God and the soul will seem — not negative perhaps — but founded upon wishful thinking and unacceptable articles of faith. For the ordinary reader, however, the word "negative," when applied to Buddhism, will suggest something far different from a philosophically acute way of approaching the Ultimate, conjuring up pictures of a bleak doctrine of escapism aimed at personal annihilation. Behind the Pope's words we can detect echoes of the ancient texts: "There are, monks, some recluses and brahmans who charge me with being an annihilationist, saying that the recluse Gotama teaches the annihilation of an existent being. That is false misrepresentation. What I teach, in the past as also now, is suffering and the cessation of suffering" (MN 22).

Even more worrisome than the Pope's characterization of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as negative is his contention that "the Buddhist doctrine of salvation constitutes the central point, or rather the only point, of this system." The conclusion implied by this pronouncement, left hanging silently behind the lines, is that Buddhism is incapable of offering meaningful guidance to people immersed in the problems of everyday life; it is an otherworldly religion of escape suited only for those of an ascetic bent.

While Western scholars in the past have focused upon the Buddhist doctrine of salvation as their main point of interest, the living traditions of Buddhism as practiced by its adherents reveal that this attitude, being one-sided to begin with, must yield one-sided results. The Buddhist texts themselves show that Buddhism addresses as wide a range of concerns as any other of humanity's great religions. Nibbana remains the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and is certainly "the central point" of the Dhamma, but it is by no means "the only point" for which the Buddha proclaimed his Teaching.

According to the Buddhist texts, the Dhamma is intended to promote three types of good, each by way of different but overlapping sets of principles. These three goals, though integrated into the framework of a single internally consistent teaching, enable the Dhamma to address individuals at different stages of spiritual development, with varying capacities for comprehension. The three goods are:

1. the good pertaining to the present life (ditthadhammattha), i.e., the achievement of happiness and well-being here and now, through ethical living and harmonious relationships based on kindness and compassion;

2. the good pertaining to the future life (samparayikattha), i.e., a favorable rebirth within the round of existence, by practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and cultivating the mind in meditation; and

3. the ultimate good (paramattha), i.e., the attainment of Nibbana, by following the complete training defined by the Noble Eightfold Path.

For most Buddhists in their day-to-day lives, the pursuit of Nibbana is a distant rather than an immediate goal, to be approached gradually during the long course of rebirths. Until they are ready for a direct assault on the final good, they expect to walk the path for many lives within samsara, pursuing their mundane welfare while aspiring for the Ultimate. To assist them in this endeavor, the Buddha has taught numerous guidelines that pertain to ethically upright living within the confines of the world. In the Sigalovada Sutta, for example, he enumerates the reciprocal duties of parents and children, husband and wife, friends and friends, employers and employees, teachers and students, religious and laity. He made right livelihood an integral part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and explained what it implies in the life of a busy lay person. During his long ministry he gave advice to merchants on the prudent conduct of business, to young wives on how to behave toward their husbands, to rulers on how to administer their state. All such guidance, issuing from the Buddha's great compassion, is designed to promote the welfare and happiness of the world while at the same time steering his followers toward a pleasant rebirth and gradual progress toward final liberation.

Yet, while the Buddha offers a graduated teaching adjusted to the varying life situations of his disciples, he does not allow any illusion to linger about the ultimate aim of his Doctrine. That aim is Nibbana, which is not a consoling reconciliation with the world but irreversible deliverance from the world. Such deliverance cannot be gained merely by piety and good works performed in a spirit of social sympathy. It can be won only by renunciation, by "the relinquishment of all acquisitions" (*sabb'upadhipatinissagga*), including among such "acquisitions" the bodily and mental processes that we identify as our self. The achievement of this end is necessarily individual. It must be arrived at through personal purification and personal insight, as the fruit of sustained effort in fulfilling the entire course of training. Hence the Buddha did not set out to found a church capable of embracing all humanity within the fold of a single creed. He lays down a path — a path perfect in its ideal formulation — to be trodden by imperfect human beings under the imperfect conditions that life within the world affords. While the quest for the highest goal culminates in deliverance from the world, this same ideal "bends back" toward the world and spells out standards of conduct and a scale of values to guide the unenlightened manyfolk in their daily struggles against the streams of greed, hatred, and delusion. Nibbana remains the "chief point" and the omega point of the Dhamma. But as this goal is to be experienced as the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion, it defines the condition for its realization as a life devoted to overcoming greed through generosity, to overcoming hatred through patience and loving kindness, and to overcoming delusion through wisdom and understanding.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul asserts that "the 'enlightenment' experienced by the Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and suffering for man" (p.85). No doubt the fact that the book consistently encloses the word "enlightenment" in quotation marks already suggests that the Pope's attitude to Buddhism is not an appreciative one. This suggestion is confirmed by his manner of characterizing the content of the enlightenment, which reduces the Buddha's great awakening beneath the Bodhi tree to a caricature.

By way of rejoinder it should first be said that Buddhism does not regard the world in itself as either good or bad, and the Buddha never described the world as "the source of evil" for man. The Buddhist texts scrupulously use terms with moral connotations, such as "good" and "evil," solely to evaluate intentional actions and the persons and states of mind from which such actions spring. They do not ascribe moral qualities to entities that are incapable of moral initiative. Thus actions are bad (*papa, akusala*) when they intend harm and suffering for oneself and others, good (*kalyana, kusala*) when they aim at promoting happiness and well-being. The Buddha's analysis of the roots of good and evil also proceeds entirely within the sphere of psychological ethics without overstepping the bounds of that domain. According to the Buddha the roots of evil are the unwholesome springs of action: greed, hatred, and delusion; the roots of good are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, i.e., detachment, loving-kindness, and understanding. The process of spiritual development in Buddhism can be described, from one angle, as the attenuation and eradication of the unwholesome roots by

the cultivation of their wholesome opposites. The entire process centers upon the mind as the sole source of both good and evil, with the world set well in the background of this striving for internal purification.

In his formula of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha does declare that worldly existence is *dukkha*, but *dukkha* does not mean evil. It means, rather, unsatisfactory, inadequate, subject to suffering. To understand why the Buddha states that all worldly existence is *dukkha* one must view this statement in its wider context. According to the Buddha's teaching, our individual lives unfold within a beginningless cycle of rebirths, samsara, wherein all living beings except the enlightened ones wander on driven by the thirst for continued becoming. Each individual life beginning with birth and ending with death is thus but a "link" in an infinite chain of lives, a single turn of the wheel of existence. As we move within samsara, again and again we undergo birth, aging, illness, and death, again and again we experience pain and sorrow, anxiety and stress, conflict and disappointment. It is for this reason that the Buddha declares that life within the confines of samsara is *dukkha*.

Buddhism locates the cause of our suffering, not in the world considered as an objective reality, but in our own minds. The root of suffering is ignorance coupled with craving; because we fail to understand the true nature of things, our lives are propelled by blind desires for pleasure, power, and renewed becoming, desires which eventuate in pain and grief. The Buddha's teaching is concerned, not with the obliteration of the world, but with the obliteration of ignorance and craving. When greed, hatred, and delusion are quenched, one then experiences the perfect peace of Nibbana throughout the duration of one's life in the world, and with the end of life one is permanently released from the round of rebirths into the Unconditioned.

The Pontiff describes Nibbana as "a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world," adding that in Buddhism salvation means "above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil" (p.86). By such statements he represents Buddhism to his readers as a quietistic doctrine of withdrawal which can address the momentous problems that face humanity today only by politely turning its back on them. This is hardly a satisfactory depiction of Early Buddhism, in which transcendence of the world is stressed, let alone of Mahayana Buddhism, in which the bodhisattva's compassionate activity on behalf of the world becomes the guiding ideal.

The Pali word that the Pope interprets as "indifference" is presumably *upekkha*. The real meaning of this word is equanimity, not indifference in the sense of unconcern for others. As a spiritual virtue, *upekkha* means equanimity in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune. It is evenness of mind, unshakeable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. *Upekkha* is freedom from all points of self-reference; it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the "divine abodes": boundless loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. The last does not override and negate the preceding three, but perfects and consummates them.

If Buddhism in practice has not always lived up to the high ideals posited by the original Teaching, this is to be understood as a result of the downward gravitational pull of human nature, not as a consequence of any emphasis on apathy and indifference in the pristine Dhamma. The Buddhist texts provide ample evidence that the attainment of Nibbana does not issue in a stolid indifference to the world. The Buddha himself, the ideal model for his followers, led an active life of 45 years after his enlightenment dedicated to the uplift of humanity. Throughout Buddhist history, the great spiritual masters of the Dhamma have emulated the Awakened One's example, heeding his injunction to wander forth "for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans."

It is not only enlightened monks and nuns who have displayed this sense of spiritual mission. As a corporate whole, Buddhism has inspired and animated all the Asian cultures in which it has taken root. It spread without violence and bloodshed, without forcible conversions, winning adherents entirely by its lofty teachings and the exemplary lives of its followers. Wherever the Dhamma took root, it has provided hope and encouragement, pointing to lofty ethical and spiritual ideals, spelling out concrete codes of moral guidance for the whole society. It needs only a little reflection to decide whether such a result is possible in a doctrine that advocates total apathy or callous self-absorption as the highest good.

Chapter 30

Meeting the Divine Messengers

The traditional legend of the Buddha's quest for enlightenment tells us that throughout his youth and early manhood Prince Siddhattha, the Bodhisatta, lived in complete ignorance of the most elementary facts of human life. His father, anxious to protect his sensitive son from exposure to suffering, kept him an unwitting captive of nescience. Incarcerated in the splendor of his palace, amply supplied with sensual pleasures and surrounded by merry friends, the prince did not entertain even the faintest suspicion that life could offer anything other than an endless succession of amusements and festivities. It was only on that fateful day in his twenty-ninth year, when curiosity led him out beyond the palace walls, that he encountered the four "divine messengers" that were to change his destiny. The first three were the old man, the sick man, and the corpse, which taught him the shocking truths of old age, illness, and death; the fourth was a wandering ascetic, who revealed to him the existence of a path whereby all suffering can be fully transcended.

This charming story, which has nurtured the faith of Buddhists through the centuries, enshrines at its heart a profound psychological truth. In the language of myth it speaks to us, not merely of events that may have taken place centuries ago, but of a process of awakening through which each of us must pass if the Dhamma is to come to life within ourselves. Beneath the symbolic veneer of the ancient legend we can see that Prince Siddhattha's youthful sojourn in the palace was not so different from the way in which most of us today pass our entire lives — often, sadly, until it is too late to strike out in a new direction. Our homes may not be royal palaces, and the wealth at our disposal may not approach anywhere near that of a North Indian rajah, but we share with the young Prince Siddhattha a blissful (and often willful) oblivion to stark realities that are constantly thrusting themselves on our attention. If the Dhamma is to be more than the bland, humdrum background of a comfortable life, if it is to become the inspiring, sometimes grating voice that steers us on to the great path of awakening, we ourselves must emulate the Bodhisatta in his process of maturation. We must join him on that journey outside the palace walls — the walls of our own self-assuring preconceptions — and see for ourselves the divine messengers we so often miss because our eyes are fixed on "more important things," i.e., on our mundane preoccupations and goals.

The Buddha says that there are few who are stirred by things that are truly stirring, compared to those people, far more numerous, who are not so stirred. The spurs to awakening press in on us from all sides, yet too often, instead of acknowledging them, we respond simply by putting on another layer of clothes to protect ourselves from their sting. This statement is not disproved even by the recent deluge of discussion and literature on aging, life-threatening illnesses, and alternative approaches to death and dying. For open and honest awareness is still not sufficient for the divine messengers to get their message across. In order for them to convey their message, the message that can goad us on to the path to liberation, something more is needed. We must confront aging, illness, and death, not simply as inescapable realities with which we must somehow cope at the practical level, but as envoys from the beyond, from the far shore, disclosing new dimensions of meaning.

This disclosure takes place at two levels. First, to become divine messengers, the facts of aging, illness, and death must jolt us into an awareness of the fragile, precarious nature of our normal day-to-day lives. They must impress upon our minds the radical deficiency that runs through all our worldly concerns, extending to conditioned existence in its totality. Thereby they become windows opening upon the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering, which the Buddha says comprises not only birth, aging, illness, and death, not only sorrow, grief, pain, and misery, but all the "five aggregates of clinging" that make up our being-in-the-world.

When we meet the divine messengers at this level, they become catalysts that can induce in us a profound internal transformation. We realize that because we are frail and inescapably mortal we must make drastic changes in our existential priorities and personal values. Instead of letting our lives be consumed by transient trivia, by things that are here today and gone tomorrow, we must give weight to "what really counts," to aims and actions that will exert a lasting influence upon our long-range destinies — upon our final destiny in this life, and upon our ultimate direction in the cycle of repeated birth and death.

Before such a revaluation takes place, we generally live in a condition that the Buddha describes by the term *pamada*, negligence or heedlessness. Imagining ourselves immortal, and the world our personal playground, we devote our energies to the accumulation of wealth, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, the achievement of status, the quest for fame and renown. The remedy for heedlessness is the very same quality that was aroused in the Bodhisatta when he met the divine messengers in the streets of Kapilavatthu. This quality, called in Pali *samvega*, is a sense of urgency, an inner commotion or shock which does not allow us to rest content with our habitual adjustment to the world. Instead it drives us on, out of our cozy palaces and into unfamiliar jungles, to work out with diligence an authentic solution to our existential plight.

It is at this point that the second function of the divine messengers comes to prominence. For aging, sickness, and death are not only emblems of the unsatisfactory nature of mundane existence but pointers to a deeper reality that lies beyond. In the traditional legend the old man, the sick man, and the corpse are gods in disguise; they have been sent down to earth from the highest heaven to awaken the Bodhisatta to his momentous mission, and once they have delivered their message they resume their celestial forms. The final word of the Dhamma is not surrender, not an injunction to resign ourselves stoically to old age, sickness, and death. This is the preliminary message, the announcement that our house is ablaze. The final message is other: an ebullient cry that there is a place of safety, an open field beyond the flames, and a clear exit sign pointing the way of escape.

If in this process of awakening we must meet old age, sickness, and death face to face, that is because the place of safety can be reached only by honest confrontation with the stark truths about human existence. We cannot reach safety by pretending that the flames that engulf our home are nothing but bouquets of flowers: we must see them as they are, as real flames. When, however, we do look at the divine messengers squarely, without embarrassment or fear, we will find that their faces undergo an unexpected metamorphosis. Before our eyes, by subtle degrees, they change into another face — the face of the Buddha, with its serene smile of triumph over the army of Mara, over the demons of Desire and Death. The divine messengers point to what lies beyond the transient, to a dimension of reality where there is no more aging, no more sickness, and no more death. This is the goal and final destination of the Buddhist path — Nibbana, the Unaging, the Unailing, the Deathless. It is to direct us there that the divine messengers have appeared in our midst, and the good news of deliverance is their message.

Chapter 31

Walking Even Amidst the Uneven

The Buddha often speaks of life in the world as an uneven path that constantly challenges us to walk evenly. Each day countless obstacles threaten to obstruct us, to divert us, to knock us off balance, and steady mindfulness and firm determination are needed to avoid losing our way in the dark sidetracks of greed and anger. To stumble may be inevitable until we reach the great highway of the noble ones, but with a clear vision of the goal and diligent effort we can avoid tumbling into the ditches that line the road.

If the task of practicing the Dhamma while living in the world has always been difficult, our modern commercial culture has increased that difficulty acutely. No longer is it the case that the desires to be tamed by Dhamma practice are the simple, relatively innocent urges implanted in us by nature or stimulated by a basic subsistence economy. Like unsuspecting fish caught in a net, we move within the coils of a global social and economic order predicated on the premise that the essential human activity is the production and consumption of commodities. From the standpoint of this system, the final good of human life is to enjoy *goods*, and the combined ingenuity of laboratory researchers and business magnates ensures that the goods to be enjoyed pour forth in inexhaustible variety.

The law that governs the global economic order is a simple one: never allow desire to abate. The media of communication, our modern miracle workers, employ every strategy at their disposal to ensure that this calamity will not befall us. Through an uninterrupted series of messages they contrive to inflame our fantasies and titillate our appetites with an intensity that would banish the word "enough" from our vocabulary. But despite its mammoth dimensions and global reach, the entire corporate culture rests upon a pervasive illusion that has become so widespread that it seems almost a self-evident truth. This is the idea that happiness is proportional to the quantity and monetary value of our possessions. We are led to believe that by extending our financial assets, by acquiring ownership over more and more goods, we thereby come closer to the good, to becoming happier, more contented, more deeply fulfilled human beings. Yet this belief, this assumption so rarely questioned, is precisely the magical trick, the sleight-of-hand deception, that creates the prison cage of our misery. For so long as we seek happiness by trying to quench desire, the more we strengthen our bondage to the implacable demands of desire. The Suttas compare this process to the attempt to slake thirst by drinking sea water: far from eliminating thirst, the sea water will only increase it.

At the heart of the consumerist culture we find this puzzling paradox, that when we pursue wealth as an end in itself, instead of arriving at true happiness we only seem further removed from it. This conclusion is easily confirmed if we examine the lives of those who come closest to fulfilling the consumerist dream. Those who enjoy the most abundant wealth and exercise the greatest power are rarely models of contentment. To the contrary, they often live on the edge of despair and can avoid slipping over the edge only by kindling again and again the quest for more wealth, more power, and more pleasure in a viciously degrading cycle.

When we reflect on this situation in the light of the Buddha's Teaching, the reason for the perpetual failure of consumerism stands forth in clear relief. The reason, as the Buddha tells us so succinctly, is that craving is the cause of suffering. By its own nature craving is insatiable, and thus the more our personal lives are governed by the assumption that the gratification of craving is the way to happiness, the more we are bound to reap disappointment. When an entire society is founded upon the principles of consumerism, upon the drive to produce and sell without concern for genuine human needs, the outcome may well be catastrophic.

According to the Buddha's Teaching the way to genuine happiness does not lie in the indulgence of desire but in uncovering and eliminating the cause of suffering, which in practical terms means the control and removal of craving. To adopt such an approach is not a matter of forcing oneself into the mold of a cold puritanical asceticism. The Dhamma is a gradual teaching which instructs us how to order our lives in ways that are immediately rewarding and gratifying. It does not promote personal development by demands for repression and self-affliction, but by gently offering us practical guidelines applicable to our present circumstances, guidelines that help us grow toward genuine happiness and peace.

For those involved in civilian life, seeking to raise a family and to forge their fortune within the world, the

Buddha does not enjoin ascetic withdrawal from social and civil obligations. He recommends, rather, a life regulated by moral values aimed at the cultivation of wholesome qualities of mind. To his lay disciples he does not even decry the accumulation of wealth or extol poverty as a preferred alternative. He recommends only that wealth be acquired by right livelihood and be utilized in meaningful ways to promote the happiness of oneself and others.

In his advice to the village headman Rasiya (SN 42:12) the Buddha describes three praiseworthy qualities in a householder who enjoys sense pleasures: he acquires wealth righteously; he makes himself happy and comfortable with the wealth thus earned; and he shares his wealth and does meritorious deeds. The practice of meritorious deeds introduces a spiritual dimension to the proper employment of wealth, a dimension based on the recognition that greater happiness comes from giving than from gaining. To give is not only a way to reduce our greed and attachment, not only a way to acquire merit productive of future benefits, but a directly visible source of joy which provides immediate confirmation of the central pillar on which the entire Dhamma rests: that the path to happiness is one of relinquishment rather than one of accumulation.

But while the Buddha praises the virtuous householder who possesses the above three qualities, he does not stop there. He introduces a fourth quality which distinguishes the virtuous lay followers into two groups: on one side, those who enjoy sense pleasures while remaining tied to them, blind to the danger and unaware of an escape; on the other, those who enjoy sense pleasures without being tied to them, seeing the danger and aware of an escape. It is the second of these that the Buddha declares superior. This pronouncement offers us an insight into the Buddha's final solution to the challenge posed by consumerism. The final solution is not a limp compromise between indulgence and virtue but a bold, decisive step in the direction of detachment, an inner renunciation that enables one to rise above the whole round of production and consumption even while living within its boundaries. The incentive for this movement comes from seeing the danger: that there is no stable happiness to be gained by the pursuit of sense pleasures, that sense pleasures "give little satisfaction and are productive of much suffering." Its completion comes from recognizing an escape: that the removal of desire and lust brings an unshakable peace and freedom that is not contingent upon external circumstances.

While it may be difficult to master desire for material things within the confines of household life, the Buddha, in his wisdom, created a model for the greater Buddhist community to emulate, indeed a model for the world as a whole. This is the Sangha, the order of monks and nuns, pledged to a mode of living in which needs are reduced to the most basic and their satisfaction provided in the simplest ways. While only a few may have the opportunity and urge to leave behind the household life in order to devote their energies unhindered to the task of self-purification, the ideal Buddhist social order forms a pyramid in which those at the apex, dedicated to the ultimate goal of deliverance, serve as the models and teachers for those still enmeshed in the demands of economic subsistence.

By their purity, peacefulness, and wisdom the mature monastics demonstrate to the lay community, and to all those who have eyes to see, where true happiness is to be found. They show that happiness is to be found, not in acquisition and self-indulgence, but in freedom from desire, in renunciation and detachment. Whether as lay disciple or as monk, to enter the course of training that culminates in such freedom is to walk evenly within the uneven terrain of the world. It is to recover, even with one's initial steps, a balance of living so sorely needed amidst the loud demands and hollow promises of our rapacious consumerist culture.

Chapter 32

Message for a Globalized World

Over the past three decades the world has been dramatically transformed in ways that none but a handful of prophets and visionaries could have foreseen even a hundred years ago. From a multitude of loosely connected nation-states it has quickly evolved into a tightly knit global community linked together by rapid means of transportation and instantaneous media of communication. Old barriers of space and time have dropped away, confronting us with new vistas of self-understanding and forcing us to recognize the hard truth that we all face a common human destiny. The claims to special privilege of a particular people, nation, race, or religion now sound hollow. As occupants of the same planet — a bright blue jewel suspended in the frigid blackness of infinite space — we either flourish together or perish together. In the long run between these two alternatives no middle ground is feasible.

But while our proud technology has enabled us to split the atom and unscramble genetic codes, the daily newspapers remind us that our mastery over the external world has not ushered in the utopia that we had so confidently anticipated. To the contrary, the shrinking of global boundaries has given rise to fresh problems of enormous scope — social, political, and psychological problems so grave that they throw into question the continued survival of our planet and our race. The problems that challenge the global community today are legion. They include the depletion of the earth's natural resources and the despoliation of the environment; regional tensions of ethnic and religious character; the continuing spread of nuclear weapons; disregard for human rights; the widening gap between the rich and the poor. While such problems have been extensively discussed from social, political, and economic points of view, they also cry out for critical examination from a religious viewpoint as well.

A spiritually sensitive mind would not look upon these problems as isolated phenomena to be treated by piecemeal solutions, but would insist on probing into unexplored areas for hidden roots and subtle interconnections. From such a perspective, what is most striking when we reflect upon our global ailments as a whole is their essentially symptomatic character. Beneath their outward diversity they appear to be so many manifestations of a common root, of a deep and hidden spiritual malignancy infecting our social organism. This common root might be briefly characterized as a stubborn insistence on placing short-term, narrowly considered self-interests (including the interests of the limited social or ethnic groups to which we happen to belong) above the long-range, vital good of the broader human community. The multitude of social ills that assail us cannot be adequately accounted for without bringing into view the powerful human drives that lie behind them. And what is distinctive about these drives is that they derive from a pernicious distortion in the functioning of the human mind which sends us blindly in pursuit of factional, divisive, circumscribed ends even when such pursuits threaten to be ultimately self-destructive.

The most valuable contribution that the Buddha's teaching can make to helping us resolve the great dilemmas facing us today is twofold: first, its uncompromisingly realistic analysis of the psychological springs of human suffering, and second, the ethically ennobling discipline it proposes as the solution. The Buddha explains that the hidden springs of human suffering, in both the personal and social dimensions of our lives, consist of three mental factors called the unwholesome roots. These three roots — which may be regarded as the three prongs of the ego-consciousness — are greed, hatred, and delusion. The aim of the Buddhist spiritual path is to gradually subdue these three evil roots by cultivating the mental factors that are directly opposed to them. These are the three wholesome roots, namely: non-greed, which is expressed as generosity, detachment, and contentment; non-hatred, which becomes manifested as loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and forgiveness; and non-delusion, which arises as wisdom, insight, and understanding.

If we contemplate, in the light of the Buddhist analysis, the dangers that hang over us in our globalized world order, it will become clear that they have assumed such precarious proportions due to the unrestrained proliferation of greed, hatred, and delusion as the basis of human conduct. It is not that these dark forces of the mind were first awakened with the Industrial Revolution; they have indeed been the deep springs of so much suffering and destructiveness since time immemorial. But the one-sided development of humankind —

the development of outward control over nature, coupled with the almost complete neglect of any attempts to achieve self-understanding — has today given the unwholesome roots an awesome, unprecedented power that veers ever closer to the catastrophic.

Through the prevalence of greed the world has become transformed into a global marketplace where human beings are reduced to the status of consumers, even commodities, and where materialistic desires are provoked at volatile intensities. Through the prevalence of hatred, which is often kindled by competing interests governed by greed, national and ethnic differences become the breeding ground of suspicion and enmity, exploding in violence and destruction, in cruelty and brutality, in endless cycles of revenge. Delusion sustains the other two unwholesome roots by giving rise to false beliefs, dogmatic views, and philosophical ideologies devised in order to promote and justify patterns of conduct motivated by greed and hatred.

In the new era marked by the triumph of the free-market economy the most pernicious delusion that hangs over us is the belief that the path to human fulfillment lies in the satisfaction of artificially induced desires. Such a project can only provoke more and more greed leading to more and more reckless degrees of selfishness, and from the clash of self-seeking factions, the result will necessarily be strife and violence. If there is any validity in the Buddhist diagnosis of the human situation, the task incumbent on humankind today is clear. The entire drive of contemporary civilization has been toward the conquest and mastery of the external world. Science probes ever more deeply into the hidden secrets of matter and life, while technology and industry join hands to harness the discoveries of science for their practical applications. No doubt science and technology have made appreciable contributions toward alleviating human misery and have vastly improved the quality of our lives. Yet because the human mind, the ultimate agent behind all the monumental achievements of science, has pitifully neglected itself, our patterns of perception, motivations, and drives still move in the same dark channels in which they moved in earlier centuries — the channels of greed, hatred, and delusion — only now equipped with more powerful instruments of destruction.

As long as we continue to shirk the task of turning our attention within, toward the understanding and mastery of our own minds, our impressive accomplishments in the external sphere will fail to yield their proper fruits. While at one level they may make life safer and more comfortable, at another they will spawn baneful consequences of increasing severity and peril, even despite our best intentions. For the human race to flourish in the global age, and to live together happily and peacefully on this shrinking planet, the inescapable challenge facing us is that of coming to understand and transform ourselves.

It is here that the Buddha's Teaching becomes especially timely, even for those who are not prepared to embrace the full range of Buddhist religious faith and philosophical doctrine. In its diagnosis of greed, hatred, and delusion as the underlying causes of human suffering, the Buddha-Dhamma enables us to see the hidden roots of our private and collective predicaments. By defining a practical path of training which helps us to remove what is harmful and to foster the growth of what is beneficial, the Teaching offers us an effective remedy for tackling the problems of the globe in the one place where they are directly accessible to us: in our own minds. Because it places the burden of responsibility for our redemption on ourselves, calling for personal effort and energetic application to the taming of the mind, the Buddha's Teaching will inevitably have a bitter edge. But by providing an acute diagnosis of our illness and a precise path to deliverance, it also offers us in this global era an elevating message of hope.

Chapter 33

Aims of Buddhist Education

Ideally, education is the principal tool of human growth, essential for transforming the unlettered child into a mature and responsible adult. Yet everywhere today, both in the developed world and the developing world, we can see that formal education is in serious trouble. Classroom instruction has become so routinized and pat that children often consider school an exercise in patience rather than an adventure in learning. Even the brightest and most conscientious students easily become restless, and for many the only attractive escape routes lie along the dangerous roads of drugs, sexual experimentation, and outbursts of senseless violence. Teachers too find themselves in a dilemma, dissatisfied with the system which they serve but unable to see a meaningful alternative to it.

One major reason for this sad state of affairs is a loss of vision regarding the proper aims of education. The word "education" literally means "to bring forth," which indicates that the true task of this process is to draw forth from the mind its innate potential for understanding. The urge to learn, to know and comprehend is a basic human trait, as intrinsic to our minds as hunger and thirst are to our bodies. In today's turbulent world, however, this hunger to learn is often deformed by the same moral twists that afflict the wider society. Indeed, just as our appetite for wholesome food is exploited by the fast-food industry with tasty snacks devoid of nutritional value, so in our schools the minds of the young are deprived of the nutriment they need for healthy growth. In the name of education the students are passed through courses of standardized instruction intended to make them efficient servants of a demeaning social system. While such education may be necessary to guarantee societal stability, it does little to fulfill the higher end of learning, the illumination of the mind with the light of truth and goodness.

A major cause of our educational problems lies in the "commercialization" of education. The industrial growth model of society, which today extends its tentacles even into the largely agrarian societies of South and Southeast Asia, demands that the educational system prepare students to become productive citizens in an economic order governed by the drive to maximize profits. Such a conception of the aim of education is quite different from that consistent with Buddhist principles. Practical efficiency certainly has its place in Buddhist education, for Buddhism propounds a middle path which recognizes that our loftiest spiritual aspirations depend on a healthy body and a materially secure society. But for Buddhism the practical side of education must be integrated; with other requirements designed to bring the potentialities of human nature to maturity in the way envisioned by the Buddha. Above all, an educational policy guided by Buddhist principles must aim to instill values as much as to impart information. It must be directed, not merely toward developing social and commercial skills, but toward nurturing in the students the seeds of spiritual nobility.

Since today's secular society dictates that institutional education is to focus on preparing students for their careers, in a Buddhist country like Sri Lanka the prime responsibility for imparting the principles of the Dhamma to the students naturally falls upon the Dhamma schools. Buddhist education in the Dhamma schools should be concerned above all with the transformation of character. Since a person's character is molded by values, and values are conveyed by inspiring ideals, the first task to be faced by Buddhist educators is to determine the ideals of their educational system. If we turn to the Buddha's discourses in search of the ideals proper to a Buddhist life, we find five qualities that the Buddha often held up as the hallmarks of the model disciple, whether monk or layperson. These five qualities are faith, virtue, generosity, learning, and wisdom. Of the five, two — faith and generosity — relate primarily to the heart: they are concerned with taming the emotional side of human nature. Two relate to the intellect: learning and wisdom. The second, virtue or morality, partakes of both sides of the personality: the first three precepts-abstinence from killing, stealing, and sexual abuse-govern the emotions; the precepts of abstinence from falsehood and intoxicants help to develop the clarity and honesty necessary for realization of truth. Thus Buddhist education aims at a parallel transformation of human character and intelligence, holding both in balance and ensuring that both are brought to fulfillment.

The entire system of Buddhist education must be rooted in faith (*saddha*) — faith in the Triple Gem, and above all in the Buddha as the Fully Enlightened One, the peerless teacher and supreme guide to right

living and right understanding. Based on this faith, the students must be inspired to become accomplished in virtue (*sila*) by following the moral guidelines spelled out by the Five Precepts. They must come to know the precepts well, to understand the reasons for observing them, and to know how to apply them in the difficult circumstances of human life today. Most importantly, they should come to appreciate the positive virtues these precepts represent: kindness, honesty, purity, truthfulness, and mental sobriety. They must also acquire the spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice (*caga*), so essential for overcoming selfishness, greed, and the narrow focus on self-advancement that dominates in present-day society. To strive to fulfill the ideal of generosity is to develop compassion and renunciation, qualities which sustained the Buddha throughout his entire career. It is to learn that cooperation is greater than competition, that self-sacrifice is more fulfilling than self-aggrandizement, and that our true welfare is to be achieved through harmony and good will rather than by exploiting and dominating others.

The fourth and fifth virtues work closely together. By learning (*suta*) is meant a wide knowledge of the Buddhist texts which is to be acquired by extensive reading and persistent study. But mere learning is not sufficient. Knowledge only fulfills its proper purpose when it serves as a springboard for wisdom (*paññña*), direct personal insight into the truth of the Dhamma. Of course, the higher wisdom that consummates the Noble Eightfold Path does not lie within the domain of the Dhamma school. This wisdom must be generated by methodical mental training in calm and insight, the two wings of Buddhist meditation. But Buddhist education can go far in laying the foundation for this wisdom by clarifying the principles that are to be penetrated by insight. In this task learning and wisdom are closely interwoven, the former providing a basis for the latter. Wisdom arises by systematically working the ideas and principles learned through study into the fabric of the mind, which requires deep reflection, intelligent discussion, and keen investigation.

It is wisdom that the Buddha held up as the direct instrument of final liberation, as the key for opening the doors to the Deathless, and also as the infallible guide to success in meeting life's mundane challenges. Thus wisdom is the crown and pinnacle of the entire system of Buddhist education, and all the preliminary steps in a Buddhist educational system should be geared toward the flowering of this supreme virtue. It is with this step that education reaches completion, that it becomes illumination in the truest and deepest sense, as exclaimed by the Buddha on the night of his Awakening: "There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and light."

Chapter 34

A Discipline of Sobriety

Several months ago I went for a two-week retreat to a hermitage in the low country highly respected for the austere, meditative life of its monks. Each day a different group of *dayakas* (donors) comes to the monastery bringing almsfood, often from remote towns and villages. They arrive the previous evening, prepare an early breakfast which is sent up to the refectory, and then, in the forenoon, offer alms directly to the monks when they come down on alms round. After the other monks have collected their food and gone back up, one elder stays behind to give the Refuges and Precepts, preach a short sermon, and conduct the dedication of merit.

One day during my retreat I noticed some of the male *dayakas* behaving rather oddly near the abbot's quarters. I asked my friend, a German monk, about their strange behavior, and the explanation he gave me jolted my mind. "They were drunk," he told me. But that wasn't all. He continued: "The only thing unusual about yesterday's incident was that the men had gotten drunk early in the day. Usually they put on their best behavior until the formalities are done, then they break out the bottles."

This stark revelation aroused in me both indignation and sorrow. Indignation, at the idea that people who consider themselves Buddhists should flaunt the most basic precepts even in the sacred precincts of a monastery — indeed one of the few in Sri Lanka where the flame of arduous striving still burns. Sorrow, because this was only the latest evidence I had seen of how deeply the disease of alcoholism has eaten into the entrails of this nation, whose Buddhist heritage goes back over two thousand years. But Sri Lanka is far from being the only Buddhist country to be engulfed by the spreading wave of alcohol consumption. The wave has already swept over far too much of the shrinking Buddhist world, with Thailand and Japan ranking especially high on the fatality list.

The reasons for this ominous trend vary widely. One is rising affluence, which for the rich makes of liquor (hi-grade imported) a visible symbol of newly acquired wealth and power. Another is a burgeoning middle class, which blindly imitates the social conventions of the West. Still another is poverty, which turns the bottle into an easy escape route from the grim face of everyday reality. But whatever the reason, it is more than our woes and worries that alcohol is dissolving. It is gnawing away at the delicate fabric of Buddhist values on every level — personal, family, and social.

For his lay followers the Buddha has prescribed five precepts as the minimal moral observance: abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and the use of intoxicants. He did not lay down these precepts arbitrarily or out of compliance with ancient customs, but because he understood, with his omniscient knowledge, which lines of conduct lead to our welfare and happiness and which lead to harm and suffering. The fifth precept, it should be stressed, is not a pledge merely to abstain from intoxication or from excessive consumption of liquor. It calls for nothing short of total abstinence. By this rule the Buddha shows that he has understood well the subtle, pernicious nature of addiction. Alcoholism rarely claims its victims in a sudden swoop. Usually it sets in gradually, beginning perhaps with the social icebreaker, the drink among friends, or the cocktail after a hard day's work. But it does not stop there: slowly it sinks its talons into its victims' hearts until they are reduced to its helpless prey.

To dispel any doubt about his reasons for prescribing this precept, the Buddha has written the explanation into the rule itself: one is to refrain from the use of intoxicating drinks and drugs because they are the cause of heedlessness (*pamada*). Heedlessness means moral recklessness, disregard for the bounds between right and wrong. It is the loss of heedfulness (*appamada*), moral scrupulousness based on a keen perception of the dangers in unwholesome states. Heedfulness is the keynote of the Buddhist path, "the way to the Deathless," running through all three stages of the path: morality, concentration, and wisdom. To indulge in intoxicating drinks is to risk falling away from each stage. The use of alcohol blunts the sense of shame and moral dread and thus leads almost inevitably to a breach of the other precepts. One addicted to liquor will have little hesitation to lie or steal, will lose all sense of sexual decency, and may easily be provoked even to murder. Hard statistics clearly confirm the close connection between the use of alcohol and violent crime, not to speak of traffic accidents, occupational hazards, and disharmony within the home. Alcoholism is indeed a most costly burden on the

whole society.

When the use of intoxicants eats away at even the most basic moral scruples, little need be said about its corrosive influence on the two higher stages of the path. A mind besotted by drink will lack the alertness required for meditative training and certainly won't be able to make the fine distinctions between good and bad mental qualities needed to develop wisdom. The Buddhist path in its entirety is a discipline of sobriety, a discipline which demands the courage and honesty to take a long, hard, utterly sober look at the sobering truths about existence. Such courage and honesty will hardly be possible for one who must escape from truth into the glittering but fragile fantasyland opened up by drink and drugs.

It may well be that a mature, reasonably well-adjusted person can enjoy a few drinks with friends without turning into a drunkard or a murderous fiend. But there is another factor to consider: namely, that this life is not the only life we lead. Our stream of consciousness does not terminate with death but continues on in other forms, and the form it takes is determined by our habits, propensities, and actions in this present life. The possibilities of rebirth are boundless, yet the road to the lower realms is wide and smooth, the road upward steep and narrow. If we were ordered to walk along a narrow ledge overlooking a sharp precipice, we certainly would not want to put ourselves at risk by first enjoying a few drinks. We would be too keenly aware that nothing less than our life is at stake. If we only had eyes to see, we would realize that this is a perfect metaphor for the human condition, as the Buddha himself, the One with Vision, confirms (see SN 56:42). As human beings we walk along a narrow ledge, and if our moral sense is dulled we can easily topple over the edge, down to the plane of misery, from which it is extremely difficult to re-emerge.

But it is not for our own sakes alone, nor even for the wider benefit of our family and friends, that we should heed the Buddha's injunction to abstain from intoxicants. To do so is also part of our personal responsibility for preserving the Buddha's Sasana. The Teaching can survive only as long as its followers uphold it, and in the present day one of the most insidious corruptions eating away at the entrails of Buddhism is the extensive spread of the drinking habit among those same followers. If we truly want the Dhamma to endure long, to keep the path to deliverance open for all the world, then we must remain heedful. If the current trend continues and more and more Buddhists succumb to the lure of intoxicating drinks, we can be sure that the Teaching will perish in all but name. At this very moment of history when its message has become most urgent, the sacred Dhamma of the Buddha will be irreparably lost, drowned out by the clinking of glasses and our rounds of merry toasts.

Chapter 35

Subrahma's Problem

Today, in both East and West, a general breakdown of law and order has planted in us an implacable sense of uneasiness that creeps up on us on the streets, in our workplace, and even in our homes. The rising number of drug addicts, the increase in petty crime, the decline of respect for others — all these have jointly infected our most ordinary human encounters with an intensified atmosphere of suspicion. Many people only feel at ease behind double-locked doors, with windows secured by metal bars and gates guarded by high-alert sensors. Yet, it is often only when we have armored ourselves with the most impregnable defense systems that we discover a still more intrusive source of insecurity. This sense of fear and dread, which can eat away at our most precious moments of enjoyment, does not stem from outside threats but swells up inexplicably from within. Though it may wrap itself around our everyday affairs and send us into flurries of concern, its true cause is not so much external dangers as an unlocalized anxiety floating dizzily along the edges of the mind.

A little known sutta tucked away in the Devaputta-samyutta gives us an insight into the nature of this hidden anguish far more poignant and realistic than our most astute existentialist philosophers. In his short sutta, only eight lines of print in the Pali, a young god named Subrahma appears before the Awakened One and explains the problem weighing on his heart:

> Always anxious is this mind,
> The mind is always agitated,
> About problems present and future;
> Please tell me the release from fear.

It is perhaps ironic that it takes a deva to express so succinctly, with such elegant simplicity, the dilemma at the crux of the human condition. Subrahma's confession also makes it clear that neither the deva world nor any other set of outer conditions offers a final refuge from anguish. Luxurious mansions, lucrative jobs, unchallenged authority, high-alert security systems: none of these can guarantee inner stillness and peace. For the source of all problems is the mind itself, which follows us wherever we may go.

To understand Subrahma's distress we need only sit down quietly, draw our attention inward, and watch our thoughts as they tumble by. If we do not fix on any one thought but simply observe each thought as it passes by, we will almost surely find waves of anxiety, care, and worry running through and beneath this ceaseless procession. Our fears and concerns need not assume vast proportions, booming forth bold metaphysical decrees. But beneath the melody of constantly changing thoughts, punctuating them like the thumping of the bass in a jazz quintet, is the persistent throb of worry and care, the second rhythm of the heart.

Subrahma underscores the predicament he faced — the predicament faced by all "unenlightened worldlings" — by repeating the words "always" (*niccam*) in the first two lines. This repetition is significant. It does not mean that every thought we think is plagued by worry and dread, nor does it rule out the joy of successful achievement, the pleasure of requited love, or courage in the face of life's daunting challenges. But it does underscore the stubborn persistence of anxious dread, which trails behind us like a gruffy mongrel — growling when we cast a backward glance, ready to snap at our heels when we're off guard.

Fear and anxiety haunt the corridors of the mind because the mind is a function of time, a rolling glimmer of awareness that flows inexorably from a past that can never be undone into a future that teases us with a perpetual, undecipherable "not yet." It is just because the mind attempts to clamp down on the passage of time, wrapping its tentacles around a thousand projects and concerns, that the passage of time appears so formidable. For time means change, and change brings dissolution, the breaking of the bonds that we have forged with so much toil. Time also means the uncertainty of the future, plummeting us into unexpected challenges and inevitable old age and death.

When Subrahma came to the Buddha with his urgent plea for help, he was not seeking a prescription of Prozacs that would tide him through his next round of business deals and his dalliance with celestial nymphs. He wanted nothing less than total release from fear, and thus the Buddha did not have to pull any punches

with his answer. In four piquant lines he told Subrahma the only effective way to heal his inner wound, to heal it with no danger of relapse:

> Not apart from awakening and austerity,
> Not apart from sense restraint,
> Not apart from relinquishing all,
> Do I see any safety for living beings.

The ultimate escape from anxiety, the Buddha makes clear, is summed up in four simple measures. The most decisive are "awakening" (*bodhi*) and "relinquishment" (*nissagga*), wisdom and release. These, however, do not arise in a vacuum but only as a consequence of training in virtue and meditation, expressed here as restraint of the sense faculties and "austerity" (*tapas*), the energy of contemplative endeavor. The entire programme is directed to digging up the hidden root of anguish, which the existentialists, with all their philosophical acumen, could not discern. That root is clinging. Asleep in the deep night of ignorance, we cling to our possessions, our loved ones, our position and status; and most tenaciously of all, we cling to these "five aggregates" of form, feeling, perception, volitional activity, and consciousness, taking them to be permanent, pleasurable, and a truly existent self.

To cling to anything is to aim at preserving it, at sealing it off from the ravenous appetite of time. Yet to make such an attempt is to run smack up against the fixed decree written into the texture of being: that whatever comes to be must pass away. It is not only the object of clinging that must yield to the law of impermanence. The subject too, the one who clings, and the very act of clinging, are also bound to dissolve, perish, and pass away. To sit back trying to shape a world that will conform to our heart's desires is to fight against the inflexible law of change. But try as we may there is no escape: the sonorous truth swells up from the depths of being, and we can either heed its message or continue to stuff our ears.

The cutting irony in the solution the Buddha holds out to Subrahma lies in the fact that the prescription requires a voluntary assent to the act we instinctively try to avoid. The final escape from anxiety and care is not a warm assurance that the universe will give us a cheerful hug. It is, rather, a call for us to take the step that we habitually resist. What we fear above all else, what causes the tremors of anxiety to ripple through our heart, is the giving up of what we cherish. Yet the Buddha tells us that the only way to reach true safety is by giving up all: "Not apart from relinquishing all do I see any safety for living beings." In the end we have no choice: we must give up all, for when death comes to claim us everything we identify with will be taken away. But to go beyond anxiety we must let go now — not, of course, by a premature act of renunciation, which in many cases might even be harmful or self-destructive — but by wearing away the clinging, attachment, and acquisitiveness that lie within as the buried root of fear.

This relinquishment of clinging cannot come about through the forcible rejection of what we love and cherish. It arises from wisdom, from insight, from awakening, from breaking through the deep dark sleep of ignorance. The sovereign remedy is to see that right now, at this very moment, there is nothing we can truly claim as ours, for in reality "All this is empty of self and of what belongs to self." Form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness: all are to he given up by seeing them as they really are, as "not mine, not I, not my self." To see the truth that all conditioned things are impermanent, disintegrating, and bound to perish, is to turn away from clinging, to relinquish all. And to relinquish all is to find ourselves, not barren and empty-handed, but rich with the wealth of the noble ones. For one without clinging, there is no fear, no tremor or agitation, no dark winds of anxiety. The one without clinging is akutobhaya, one who faces no danger from any quarter. Though dwelling in the midst of aging, sickness, and death, he has reached what lies beyond aging, sickness, and death. Though the leaves fall and world systems shimmer, he sees security everywhere.

Chapter 36

Giving Dignity to Life

To ask what it means to live with dignity may sound strange in an age like our own, when our frantic struggle to make ends meet hardly allows us the leisure to ponder such weighty matters. But if we do pause a moment to give this question a little thought, we would realize soon enough that it is not merely the idle musing of someone with too much time on his hands. The question not only touches on the very meaning of our lives, but goes even beyond our personal quest for meaning to bore into the very springs of contemporary culture. For if it isn't possible to live with dignity then life has no transcendent purpose, and in such a case our only aim in the brief time allotted to us should be to snatch whatever thrills we can before the lights go off for good. But if we can give sense to the idea of living with dignity, then we need to consider whether we are actually ordering our lives in the way we should and, even more broadly, whether our culture encourages a dignified lifestyle.

Though the idea of dignity seems simple enough at first sight, it is actually fairly complex. My Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1936!) defines dignity as "elevation of character, intrinsic worth, excellence... nobleness of manner, aspect, or style." My Roget's Thesaurus (1977) groups it with "prestige, esteem, repute, honor, glory, renown, fame" — evidence that over the last forty years the word's epicenter of meaning has undergone a shift. When we inquire about living with dignity, our focus should be on the word's older nuance. What I have in mind is living with the conviction that one's life has intrinsic worth, that we possess a potential for moral excellence that resonates with the rhythm of the seasons and the silent hymn of the galaxies.

The conscious pursuit of dignity does not enjoy much popularity these days, having been crowded out by such stiff competitors as wealth and power, success and fame. Behind this devaluation of dignity lies a series of developments in Western thought that emerged in reaction to the dogmatic certainties of Christian theology. The Darwinian theory of evolution, Freud's thesis of the Id, economic determinism, the computer model of the mind: all these trends, arisen more or less independently, have worked together to undermine the notion that our lives have any more worth than the value of our bank accounts. When so many self-assured voices speak to the contrary, we no longer feel justified in viewing ourselves as the crowning glory of creation. Instead we have become convinced we are nothing but packets of protoplasm governed by selfish genes, clever monkeys with college degrees and business cards plying across highways rather than trees.

Such ideas, in however distorted a form, have seeped down from the halls of academia into popular culture, eroding our sense of human dignity on many fronts. The free-market economy, the task master of the modern social order, leads the way. For this system the primary form of human interaction is the investment and the sale, with people themselves reckoned simply as producers and consumers, sometimes even as commodities. Our vast impersonal democracies reduce the individual to a nameless face in the crowd, to be manipulated by slogans, images, and promises into voting this way or that. Cities have expanded into sprawling urban jungles, dirty and dangerous, whose dazed occupants seek an easy escape with the help of drugs and loveless sex. Escalation in crime, political corruption, upheavals in family life, the despoliation of the environment: these all speak to us as much of a deterioration in how we regard ourselves as in how we relate to others.

Amidst these pangs of forlorn hope, can the Dhamma help us recover our lost sense of dignity and thereby give new meaning to our lives? The answer to this question is yes, and in two ways: first, by justifying our claim to innate dignity, and second, by showing us what we must do to actualize our potential dignity.

For Buddhism the innate dignity of human beings does not stem from our relationship to an all-mighty God or our endowment with an immortal soul. It stems, rather, from the exalted place of human life in the broad expanse of sentient existence. Far from reducing human beings to children of chance, the Buddha teaches that the human realm is a very special realm standing squarely at the spiritual center of the cosmos. What makes human life so special is that human beings have a capacity for moral choice that is not shared by other types of beings. Though this capacity is inevitably subject to limiting conditions, we always possess, in the immediate present, a margin of inner freedom that allows us to change ourselves and hereby to change the world.

But life in the human realm is far from cozy. To the contrary, it is inconceivably difficult and complex, rife with conflicts and moral ambiguities offering enormous potential for both good and evil. This moral complexity

can make of human life a painful struggle indeed, but it also renders the human realm the most fertile ground for sowing the seeds of enlightenment. It is at this tauntingly ambiguous crossroads in the long journey of being that we can either rise to the heights of spiritual greatness or fall to degrading depths. The two alternatives branch out from each present moment, and which one we take depends on ourselves.

While this unique capacity for moral choice and spiritual awakening confers intrinsic dignity on human life, the Buddha does not emphasize this so much as he does our ability to acquire active dignity. This ability is summed up by a word that lends its flavor to the entire teaching, *ariya* or noble. The Buddha's teaching is the *ariyadhamma*, the noble doctrine, and its purpose is to change human beings from "ignorant worldlings" into noble disciples resplendent with noble wisdom. The change does not come about through mere faith and devotion but by treading the Buddhist path, which transmutes our frailties into invincible strengths and our ignorance into knowledge.

The notion of acquired dignity is closely connected with the idea of autonomy. Autonomy means self-control and self-mastery, freedom from the sway of passion and prejudice, the ability to actively determine oneself. To live with dignity means to be one's own master: to conduct one's affairs on the basis of one's own free choices instead of being pushed around by forces beyond one's control. The autonomous individual draws his or her strength from within, free from the dictates of craving and bias, guided by a thirst for righteousness and an inner perception of truth.

The person who represents the apex of dignity for Buddhism is the arahant, the liberated one, who has reached the pinnacle of spiritual autonomy: release from the dictates of greed, hatred, and delusion. The very word *arahant* suggests this sense of dignity: the word means "worthy one," one who deserves the offerings of gods and humans. Although in our present condition we might still be far from the stature of an arahant, this does not mean we are utterly lost, for the means of reaching the highest goal is already within our reach. The means is the Noble Eightfold Path with its twin pillars of right view and right conduct. Right view is the first factor of the path and the guide for all the others. To live with right view is to see that our decisions count, that our volitional actions have consequences that extend beyond themselves and conduce to our long-term happiness or suffering. The active counterpart of right view is right conduct, action guided by the ideal of moral and spiritual excellence. Right conduct in body, speech, and mind brings to fulfillment the other seven factors of the eightfold path, culminating in true knowledge and deliverance.

In today's hectic world humankind is veering recklessly in two destructive directions. One is the path of violent struggle and confrontation, the other that of frivolous self-indulgence. Beneath their apparent contrasts, what unites these two extremes is a shared disregard for human dignity: the former violates the dignity of other people, the latter undermines one's own dignity. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path is a middle way that avoids all harmful extremes. To follow this path not only brings a quiet dignity into one's own life but also answers the cynicism of our age with a note of wholesome affirmation.

Chapter 37

Lifestyles and Spiritual Progress

Newcomers to Buddhism often ask whether a person's lifestyle has any special bearing on their ability to progress along the Buddha's path, and in particular whether the Buddha had a compelling reason for establishing a monastic order governed by guidelines quite different from those that hold sway over the lay Buddhist community. Doesn't it seem, they ask, that a lay person who follows the Buddhist precepts in daily life should be able to advance just as rapidly as a monk or nun and attain the same level of enlightenment? And, if this is so, doesn't that mean that the entire monastic lifestyle becomes something superfluous, or at best a mere matter of personal choice no more relevant to one's spiritual development than whether one trains to become a doctor or an engineer?

If we suspend concern for questions of status and superiority and simply consider the two modes of life in their ideal expression, the conclusion would have to follow that the monastic life, lived *in the way envisioned by the Buddha*, is the one that conduces more effectively to the final goal. According to the Pali canon, the ultimate goal of the Dhamma is the attainment of Nibbana: the destruction of all defilements here and now and ultimate release from samsara, the round of rebirths. This attainment comes about by eliminating craving and ignorance through the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is open equally to both monastics and lay followers; monastic ordination does not confer any privileged access to the path or an empowerment that enables a monk or nun to make more rapid progress than a lay follower. But while this is so, the fact remains that the monastic life was expressly designed by the Buddha to facilitate complete dedication to the practice of the path in its three stages of virtue, concentration, and wisdom, and thus provides the optimal conditions for spiritual progress.

The monastic lifestyle does so precisely because the final goal is a state of renunciation, "the relinquishment of all acquisitions" (*sabb'upadhi-patinissagga*), and from the outset the monk's life is rooted in renunciation. In "going forth," the monk leaves behind family, possessions, and worldly position, and even the outer marks of personal identity, symbolized by hair, beard, and wardrobe. By shaving the head and donning the yellow robe, the monk has given up — in principle at least — any claim to a unique identity as his own. Outwardly indistinguishable from a hundred thousand other monks, he has become simply a "Sakyaputtiya samana," an ascetic who follows the Sakyan son (i.e., the Buddha).

The life of the monk involves radical simplicity, contentment with the barest requisites, the need to be patient in difficulty. The monastic lifestyle places the monk in dependence on the generosity and kindness of others, and imposes on him an intricate code of discipline, the Vinaya, designed to foster the essential renunciant virtues of simplicity, restraint, purity, and harmlessness. These virtues provide a sound basis for the higher attainments in concentration and insight, which are essentially stages in the progressive purification of the mind and the deepening of insight.

Of prime importance, too, is the external freedom ideally provided by the monastic life. The monastic schedule leaves the monk free from extraneous demands on his time and energy, allowing him to devote himself fully to the practice and study of the Dhamma. Of course, as the monastic life is lived today, monks take on many responsibilities not originally mentioned in the canonical texts, and in a traditional Buddhist country the village temple has become the hub of religious activity, with the monks functioning as virtual priests for the wider Buddhist community. But here we are concerned with the canonical picture of the monastic life. If the monk's life so conceived did not promote smoother progress toward the goal, it seems there would have been no sound reason for the Buddha to have established a monastic order or to have encouraged men and women so inclined to "go forth from the home life into homelessness."

While the attainment of Nibbana is the ultimate goal of early Buddhism, it is not the only goal, and one of the shortcomings in the way Theravada Buddhism has been presented to the West is the one-sided emphasis placed on the final goal over the provisional aspect of the Teaching. In traditional Buddhist lands few Buddhists see Nibbana as an immediately realistic prospect. The great majority, both lay and monastic, regard the path as a course of "gradual practice, gradual progress, and gradual achievement" extending over many lives. Their

practice as Buddhist followers centers around the performance of meritorious deeds and methodical mental purification, rooted in the confidence that the kammic law of causality and the spiritual power of the Dhamma will sustain them in their quest for deliverance.

To make clear the choices facing the lay follower we might posit two alternative models of the Buddhist lay life. On the first model lay life is seen as a field for gradual progress toward the goal through the development of wholesome qualities such as generosity, moral virtue, kindness, and understanding. The immediate aim is not direct realization of the highest truth, but the accumulation of merits leading to a happy rebirth and gradual progress toward Nibbana.

The second model recognizes the capacity of lay followers for reaching the stages of awakening in this life itself, and advocates strict moral discipline and strenuous effort in meditation to attain deep insight into the truth of the Dhamma. While there are in Buddhist countries lay people who follow the path of direct realization, their number is much smaller than those who pursue the alternative model. The reason should be obvious enough: the stakes are higher, and include a capacity for inward renunciation rare among those who must raise a family, work at a full-time job, and struggle to survive in a ruggedly competitive world. We should note further a point of prime importance: this second model of the Buddhist lay life becomes effective as a means to higher attainment precisely because it emulates the monastic model. Thus, to the extent that a lay follower embarks on the practice of the direct path to realization, he or she does so by conforming to the lifestyle of a monk or nun.

These two conceptions of the lay life need not be seen as mutually exclusive, for an earnest lay follower can adopt the first model for his or her normal routine and also stake out periods to pursue the second model, e.g., by curtailing social engagements, devoting time to deep study and meditation, and occasionally going on extended retreats. Though a monastic lifestyle might be more conducive to enlightenment than a busy life within the world, when it comes to individuals rather than models all fixed preconceptions collapse. Some lay people with heavy family and social commitments manage to make such rapid progress that they can give guidance in meditation to earnest monks, and it is not rare at all to find sincere monks deeply committed to the practice who advance slowly and with difficulty. While the monastic life, lived according to the original ideal, may provide the optimal outer conditions for spiritual progress, the actual rate of progress depends on personal effort and on the store of qualities one brings over from previous lives, and often it seems individuals deeply enmeshed in the world are better endowed in both respects than those who enter the Sangha.

In any case, whether for monk, nun, or layperson, the path to Nibbana is the same: the Noble Eightfold Path. Whatever one's personal circumstances may be, if one is truly earnest about realizing the final goal of the Dhamma one will make every effort to tread this path in the way that best fits the particular circumstances of one's life. As the Buddha himself says: "Whether it be a householder or one gone forth, it is the one of right practice that I praise, not the one of wrong practice" (SN XLV.24).

Chapter 38

A Tribute to Two Monks

"Have I not told you already, Ananda, that there must be parting and separation from all who are dear and agreeable to oneself?" These words, spoken by the Buddha to his devoted attendant on the eve of his parinibbana, took on an especially poignant meaning for me this past rainy season, when in quick succession my beloved ordination teacher, Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Mahanayaka Thera, and my longtime spiritual friend, Ven. Piyadassi Nayaka Thera, succumbed to the implacable law of impermanence. Ven. Ananda Maitreya expired on 18th July, just one month short of his 102nd birthday, Ven. Piyadassi followed exactly a month later, on 18th August, a little more than a month past his 84th birthday.

Both monks had lived full and fruitful lives in the Sangha throughout the twentieth century, leaving behind such deep tracks in the contemporary history of Sri Lankan Buddhism that it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that their death spells the end of an epoch. Yet, though the two were firmly rooted in Sri Lanka and its ancient Theravada heritage, neither was a narrow nationalist who restricted his field of activity to his native land. To the contrary, they both had a breadth of heart and range of vision that enabled them to feel at home anywhere. Their rich inner springs of compassion extended to people throughout the world, and even in their ripe old age they both traveled the globe to teach the Dhamma to all who would lend an ear. Both monks also transcended the limits of hidebound traditionalism, achieving for themselves a rare synthesis of tradition and modernity. They had studied English in their youth; had read widely in world literature, other religions, and modern modes of thought; and had developed approaches to the Dhamma that highlighted its timeless rationality and timely contemporary relevance.

My own relationship with these two elders was close and deeply personal, unfolding under such unlikely circumstances that it seems a karmic nexus had reached out across the oceans and linked us half a world away. The story of this relationship began in 1971, when I was living at a Vietnamese Buddhist center in Los Angeles and teaching world religions at a college in the sprawling conurbation of southern California. One day at our center we received notice that a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka would be coming to LA, and we invited him to stay with us and give a series of lectures on Theravada Buddhism. That Buddhist monk was none other than Ven. Piyadassi, who was then on his second world Dhamma tour. His lectures were excellent, conveying with crystal clarity and gentle humor the heart of the Buddha's teachings which he knew so well. At the end of the week, when we parted at the LA airport, Ven. Piyadassi suggested to me that some day I should come to Sri Lanka and spend time in a Buddhist monastery.

This suggestion resonated with an idea that was already taking shape in my mind, and thus the following year, when I decided to come to Asia to enter the Sangha, I wrote to Ven. Piyadassi to remind him of his invitation. In reply he gave me the name and address of a "senior prelate," Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya. At first I hesitated to contact this elder, for he was already 76 years old and I feared that at such an age he might not be fit enough to teach me. Little did I realize I was being introduced to a monk of such amazing strength and vitality that he would still be striding the globe well into his 100th year. In any case, I took the chance and wrote to him, and his welcoming reply set me on a "journey to the East" that culminated in my ordination as a bhikkhu and a three-year tutelage under him at his small village temple near Balangoda.

The future Mahanayaka Thera had been born just across the paddy field from this temple in 1896 and was ordained there as a novice in 1911. His teacher, Ven. Denihena Silananda, reputed to be the most learned monk in the Balangoda area, subjected his young pupil to a nine-year course of training so rigorous it left him only a few hours of sleep per night. But Ananda Maitreya emerged with a masterly knowledge of the Tipitaka and its commentaries and of the languages Pali and Sanskrit. At this point his far-sighted guru, aware of the need of the hour, sent him to Ananda College in Colombo to study English, a move which equipped him for his important work later in life.

Through the middle decades of this century Ven. Ananda Maitreya played a pivotal role in almost all the major episodes in the modern history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. As a teacher at Ananda College he helped to educate many of the future leaders of the nation. He founded a prestigious monastic college in Balangoda,

which he served as principal for 23 years. He served on the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry which sought to rectify the injustices imposed on Buddhism during the period of colonial rule. He was a member of the Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Editorial Board. He compiled the first modern biography of the Buddha in Sinhala and wrote school textbooks for the study of Pali, Sanskrit, and English. He joined the faculty of the new Vidyodaya University as professor of Mahayana Buddhist studies (later vice-chancellor, a position he soon relinquished because of a distaste for administrative duties). He was elected the first Mahanayaka Thera (chief prelate) of the United Amarapura Nikaya. On the wider Buddhist scene he participated in the Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma (1954-56), where he was appointed the Sri Lankan representative on the Final Editing Committee and later became chairman of the entire Council.

In 1973, at the age of 77, a new leaf opened up to Ven. Ananda Maitreya's life: that of a Buddhist missionary to the West. Between then and 1994 he must have made seven or eight extended Dhamma missions which brought him to Britain, France, the U.S.A., and Canada. He also appeared in the well-known BBC television series, *The Long Search*, where, as the informant on Theravada Buddhism, he deeply impressed viewers around the world. During one stay in the U.S., at the age of 94, he learned to use the computer and returned home with his own little desktop unit: living proof that one is never too old to learn!

On a trip to Colombo in June I had the fortune to meet Ven. Ananda Maitreya in his temple near Colombo. He had just returned from a trip to Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, and appeared to be in sound health, except for complaints about " a little phlegm trouble." He then seemed so fit, so clear-minded and energetic, that we never suspected the "little phlegm trouble" would turn into the illness that only a month later would take him from our midst. It is testimony to the high regard in which he was held in this country that a hundred thousand people attended his cremation, and the whole road which the cortege traveled from Avissawela to Balangoda (50 miles) was lined with yellow banners and flags to welcome the prelate on his last journey.

Ven. Piyadassi needs hardly an introduction to our BPS readers, who will know him through his classic The Buddha's Ancient Path, The Spectrum of Buddhism, and his many contributions to the Wheel, Bodhi Leaves, and Damsak series. It was in fact a sermon he gave in late 1957 that led to the birth of the BPS on New Year's day in 1958; an edited version of that sermon appeared as Wheel No. 1, The Seven Factors of Enlightenment. From 1960 onward he was the editor of the Damsak series, the Sinhala counterpart of the Wheel, a role he fulfilled amidst a host of other duties so numerous and demanding that they would normally require the talents of three or four monks. He was the director of the Vajirarama Monastery in Colombo, chief incumbent of the Sambodhi Vihara, and patron of a large number of Buddhist organizations, chiefly those devoted to helping the poor and handicapped. He was also one of the country's most popular preachers, constantly in demand because of his ability to convey the deep truths of the Dhamma in clear, simple language.

The salient characteristic of Ven. Piyadassi's life is summed up in the title of his biography (by Kirthie Abeyasekera), *Piyadassi: The Wandering Monk*. This, however, was not a leisurely wandering on foot with bowl and shoulder bag, but a global, airborne wandering that took him on fourteen international Dhamma tours to over fifty countries. Within Sri Lanka Ven. Piyadassi was, in his own words, "a shuttle on a loom," moving back and forth between Colombo and the provinces with hardly a pause. On his frequent trips to Kandy, once or twice a month, he would stay next door to me in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve, and through this close connection and our shared work for the BPS our friendship became deep, steadfast, and solid. His loss will be irreparable and his place irreplaceable, throughout Sri Lanka and particularly at the BPS.

May these two great elders, who for so long held aloft the torch of the Dhamma, attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana.

Chapter 39

Better Than a Hundred Years

One day not too long ago I picked up on my shortwave radio an interview with an American futurist whose name I didn't catch. A futurist, as the word implies, is one whose job it is to predict the future. By collating a vast amount of information about developments presently taking place in various fields, he discovers the most prominent trends at work beneath the surface of events, and by projecting from these trends he constructs a picture of the future over increasingly longer time frames — over the coming decade, century, and millennium. Naturally, as temporal distance from the present increases, the picture he paints becomes proportionally more liable to error; but though an element of conjecture is unavoidable in all long-range forecasts, what the futurist holds is that his projections are based squarely on the trajectory we are traveling along today.

The questions the interviewer posed drew out from the futurist an astonishing picture of things to come. In his cheery view, the great perennial springs of human suffering are about to yield to the insistent pressure of our ingenuity and determination to create a better world. The next century will usher in an era of unprecedented progress, prosperity, and justice, with radical changes taking place even on the most primordial frontiers of biology. Couples who want children will no longer be dependent on natural processes vulnerable to chance and tragedy: they will be able to specify the precise features they would like their children to have and they'll get exactly what they want. Medical science will find cures for cancer, AIDS, and other dreaded illnesses, while virtually every vital organ will be replaceable by a synthetic counterpart. Biologists will discover how to halt the process of aging, enabling us to preserve our youthfulness and vitality well into our twilight years. By the end of the next century our life span itself will be extended to 140 years. And before the next millennium draws to a close, science will have found the key to immortality: "That's a hundred percent certain," he assured us.

While I listened to this intelligent, articulate man ramble on with such optimistic verve, I felt a sense of uneasiness gnawing away in my gut. "What's wrong with this picture?" I kept on asking myself, "What's missing? What's so troubling?" Here he was, depicting a world in which humanity would triumph over every ancient nemesis, perhaps even over death itself; and yet I felt that I just couldn't buy it, that I would prefer this wretched, fragile, vulnerable, existence nature has conferred on us by birth. Why?

For one thing, it seemed to me that his glowing picture of the future depended on some pretty big assumptions — assumptions which could only work by conveniently turning a blind eye to other present trends which are very far from comforting. He was presupposing that advances in technology will bring only benefits without entailing new problems just as formidable as those that taunt us today; that by sheer cleverness we will be able to rectify old blunders without having to curb the greed that caused those blunders in the first place; that people will spontaneously place the common good above the promptings of naked avarice; that the spread of material affluence will suffice to eliminate the suspicion, hatred, and cruelty that have bred so much misery throughout history.

But, as I continue to reflect, I realized that this was not all that was troubling me about the futurist's picture; I felt there was something still deeper scratching at the back of my mind. At its root, I came to see, my disquietude revolved around the issue of orientation. The picture he presented showed a future in which human beings are completely immersed in temporal concerns, absorbed in the battle against natural limitations, oriented entirely to the conditioned world. What was conspicuously absent from his picture was what might be called "the dimension of transcendence." There was no hint that human existence is not a self-enclosed circle from which it gains its meaning, that the quest for true fulfillment requires reference to a domain beyond everything finite and temporal.

By deleting all mention of a "dimension of transcendence" the futurist could portray a humanity pledged to the idea that the ultimate good is to be realized by gaining mastery over the external world rather than mastery over ourselves. Given that life involves suffering, and that suffering arises from the clash between our desires and the nature of the world, we can deal with suffering either by changing the world so that it conforms to our desires or by changing ourselves so that our desires harmonize with the world. The picture drawn by the futurist showed a future in which the first alternative prevailed; but the Buddha, and all humanity's other

great spiritual teachers as well, unanimously recommend the second route. For them our task is not so much to manipulate the outer conditions responsible for our discontent as it is to overcome the subjective roots of discontent, to vanquish our own selfishness, craving, and ignorance.

In preferring the more ancient approach I don't mean to suggest that we must passively submit to all the frailties to which human life is prone. Stoic resignation is certainly not the answer. We must strive to eliminate debilitating diseases, to promote economic and social justice, to fashion a world in which the basic amenities of health and happiness are as widely distributed as possible. But when the driving engine of civilization becomes sheer innovation in techniques we risk venturing into dangerous areas. To struggle with Promethean audacity to bend nature to our will so that all the objective causes of our suffering will be obliterated seems an exercise in hubris — in arrogance and presumption — and, as we know from Greek tragedy, hubris inevitably provokes the wrath of the gods.

Even if our reckless tinkering with the natural order does not unleash a cosmic cataclysm, we still risk a gradual descent into the trivialization and mechanization of human life. For by making technological ingenuity the criterion of progress we lose sight of the moral depth and elevation of character which have always been the classical hallmarks of human greatness. We flatten out the vertical dimensions of our being, reducing ourselves to a purely horizontal plane in which all that matters is technical expertise and organizational efficiency. Thereby we veer closer to the situation described by T.S. Eliot, "The world ends not with a bang but a whimper."

While I reflected on the futurist's predictions, there came to mind a series of verses from the Dhammapada which offer a strikingly different picture of the challenge facing us in our lives. The verses occur in the "Chapter of the Thousands," vv.110-115. The first four stanzas tell us that it is not *how long* we live that really counts, but how we live, the qualities we embody in our innermost being: "Better than to live a hundred years immoral and unconcentrated is it to live a single day virtuous and meditative. Better than to live a hundred years foolish and unconcentrated is it to live a single day wise and meditative. Better than to live a hundred years lazy and dissipated is it to live a single day with energy firmly aroused. Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the rise and fall of things is it to live a single day seeing the rise and fall of things."

In these verses the Buddha tells us that our primary task, the task to which all others should be subordinate, is to master ourselves. The challenge he throws at us is not to remove all the thorns strewn over the earth, but to put on sandals, to vanquish the desires responsible for our suffering in the very place where they arise: in our own minds. As long as our lives are ruled by desire, there will never be an end to discontent, for the elimination of one obstacle will only give rise to a new one in a self-replicating cycle. What is essential is not to *prolong* life by readjusting biological processes so that they fulfill our wildest dreams, but to *ennoble* life by sober mental training within the humble limits of our natural condition. And this is achieved, as the Buddha repeatedly stresses, by the triple discipline of moral restraint, meditation, and deep insight into the impermanence of all conditioned things.

The last two verses in this series introduce the end toward which this training points, which is also the goal toward which our lives should be steered: "Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the Deathless is it to live a single day seeing the Deathless. Better than to live a hundred years without seeing the Supreme Truth is it to live a single day seeing the Supreme Truth." If human progress is not to be reduced to a mere pageant of technological stunts aimed at pushing back our natural limits, we require some polestar toward which to steer our lives, something which enables us to transcend the boundaries of both life and death. For Buddhism that is Nibbana, the Deathless, the Supreme Truth, the state beyond all limiting conditions. Without this transcendent element we might explore the distant galaxies and play cards with the genetic code, but our lives will remain vain and hollow. Fullness of meaning can come only from the source of meaning, from that which is transcendent and unconditioned. To strive for this goal is to find a depth of value and a peak of excellence that can never be equaled by brazen technological audacity. To realize this goal is to reach the end of suffering: to find deathlessness here and now, even in the midst of this imperfect world still subject, as always, to old age, illness, and death.

Chapter 40

Two Paths to Knowledge

Many of the formidable social and cultural problems we face today are rooted in the sharp schism that has divided Western civilization between science and religion, where science claims invincible knowledge based on the empirical investigation of the natural world, while religion can do little more than call for faith in supernatural creeds and obedience to codes of ethics that require restraint, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice. Since religion, as traditionally understood, often rests on little more than blithe promises and pompous threats, its appeals to our allegiance seldom win assent, while the ethical ideals it advocates stand hardly a fighting chance against the constant injunction — thrust upon us by TV, radio, and signboard — to enjoy life to the hilt while we can. As a result, a vast portion of humankind today has become alienated from religion as a meaningful guide to life, left with no alternative but to plunge headlong into the secular religion of consumerism and hedonism. Too often, those in the religious camp, sensing the threat secularism poses to their own security, feel driven toward an aggressive fundamentalism in a desperate bid to salvage traditional loyalties.

The quest to establish a sound basis for conduct in today's world has been made particularly difficult because one consequence of the dominance of the scientific worldview has been the banishment of values from the domain of the real. While many scientists, in their personal lives, are staunch advocates of such ideals as world peace, political justice, and greater economic equality, the worldview promulgated by modern science grants to values no objective grounding in the grand scheme of things. From this perspective, their root and basis is purely subjective, and thus they bring along all the qualities the notion of subjectivity suggests: being personal, private, relative, even arbitrary. The overall effect of this scission, despite the best intentions of many responsible scientists, has been to give a green light to lifestyles founded on the quest for personal gratification and a power drive aimed at the exploitation of others.

In contrast to the classical Western antithesis of religion and science, Buddhism shares with science a common commitment to uncover the truth about the world. Both Buddhism and science draw a sharp distinction between the way things appear, and the way they really are, and both offer to open our minds to insights into the real nature of things normally hidden from us by false ideas based on sense perception and "common sense." Nevertheless, despite this affinity, it is also necessary to recognize the great differences in aim and orientation that separate Buddhism and science. While both may share certain conceptions about the nature of reality, science is essentially a project designed to provide us with objective, factual knowledge, with information pertaining to the public domain, while Buddhism is a spiritual path intended to promote inner transformation and the realization of the highest good, called enlightenment, liberation, or Nibbana. In Buddhism, the quest for knowledge is important not as an end in itself, but because the main cause of our bondage and suffering is ignorance, not understanding things as they really are, and thus the antidote needed to heal ourselves is knowledge or insight.

Again, the knowledge to be acquired by the practice of Dhamma differs significantly from that sought by science in several major respects. Most importantly, the knowledge sought is not simply the acquisition of objective information about the constitution and operations of the physical world, but a deep personal insight into the real nature of one's personal existence. The aim is not to understand reality from the outside, but from the inside, from the perspective of one's own, living experience. One seeks not factual knowledge, but insight or wisdom, a personal knowledge, inescapably subjective, whose whole value lies in its transformative impact on one's life. Concern with the outer world, as an object of knowledge, arises only insofar as the outer world is inextricably implicated in experience. As the Buddha says: "It is in this body, with its perception and thought, that I declare is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way to the cessation of the world."

Because Buddhism takes personal experience as its starting point, without aiming to use experience as a springboard to an impersonal, objective type of knowledge, it includes within its domain the entire spectrum of qualities disclosed by personal experience. This means that Buddhism gives prime consideration to values. But even more, values for Buddhism are not merely projections of subjective judgments which we fashion according

to our personal whims, social needs, or cultural conditioning; to the contrary, they are written into the texture of reality just as firmly as the laws of motion and thermodynamics. Hence, values can be evaluated: rated in terms of truth and falsity, ranked as valid and invalid, and part of our task in giving meaning to our lives is to unearth the true scheme of values. To determine the true gradation of values, we must turn our attention inward and use subjective criteria of investigation; but what we find, far from being private or arbitrary, is an integral part of the objective order, permeated by the same lawfulness as that which governs the movement of the planets and the stars.

Affirmation of the objective reality of value implies another major distinction between Buddhism and science. In order for the liberating knowledge of enlightenment to arise, the investigator must undergo a profound personal transformation guided by inner perception of the genuine values. While natural science can be undertaken as a purely intellectual discipline, the Buddhist quest in its entirety is an existential discipline which can only be implemented by regulating one's conduct, purifying one's mind, and refining one's capacity for attention to one's own bodily and mental processes. This training requires compliance with ethics all the way through, and thus ethical guidelines support and pervade the entire training from its starting point in right action to its culmination in the highest liberation of the mind.

What is especially noteworthy is that the ethical thrust of the Buddhist training and its cognitive thrust converge on the same point, the realization of the truth of selflessness (*anatta*). It is just here that contemporary science approaches Buddhism in its discovery of the process nature of actuality, implying the lack of an ultimate substance concealed behind the sequence of events. But this correspondence again points to a fundamental difference. In Buddhism the impermanent and substanceless nature of reality is not simply a factual truth apprehended by objective knowledge. It is above all an existential truth, a transformative principle offering the key to right understanding and right liberation. To use this key to open the door to spiritual freedom, its sole purpose, we must govern our conduct on the premise that the idea of a substantial self is a delusion. It is insufficient merely to give intellectual assent to the idea of selflessness and turn it into a plaything of thought. The principle must be penetrated by training ourselves to discover the absence of selfhood in its subtlest hiding place, the deep recesses of our own minds.

It is to be hoped that Buddhist thinkers and open-minded scientists, by sharing their insights and reflections, can show us an effective way to heal the rift between objective knowledge and spiritual wisdom and thus bring about a reconciliation between science and spirituality. In this way spiritual practice will become an integral part of the discipline aimed at knowledge, and spiritual practice and knowledge in combination will become the tools for achieving the highest good, enlightenment and spiritual freedom. This has always been the position of Buddhism, as evidenced by the most ancient texts themselves. We must remember that the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is not only, like the scientist, a *lokavidu*, "a knower of the world" but also, above all, a *vijjacaranasampanno*, "one complete in both knowledge and conduct."

Chapter 41

Anicca Vata Sankhara

Anicca vata sankhara — "Impermanent, alas, are all formations!" — is the phrase used in Theravada Buddhist lands to announce the death of a loved one, but I have not quoted this line here in order to begin an obituary. I do so simply to introduce the subject of this essay, which is the word sankhara itself. Sometimes a single Pali word has such rich implications that merely to sit down and draw them out can shed as much light on the Buddha's teaching as a long expository article. This is indeed the case with the word sankhara. The word stands squarely at the heart of the Dhamma, and to trace its various strands of meaning is to get a glimpse into the Buddha's own vision of reality.

The word *sankhara* is derived from the prefix *sam*, meaning "together," joined to the noun kara, "doing, making." *Sankharas* are thus "co-doings," things that act in concert with other things, or things that are made by a combination of other things. Translators have rendered the word in many different ways: formations, confections, activities, processes, forces, compounds, compositions, fabrications, determinations, synergies, constructions. All are clumsy attempts to capture the meaning of a philosophical concept for which we have no exact parallel, and thus all English renderings are bound to be imprecise. I myself use "formations" and "volitional formations," aware this choice is as defective as any other.

However, though it is impossible to discover an exact English equivalent for *sankhara*, by exploring its actual usage we can still gain insight into how the word functions in the "thought world" of the Dhamma. In the suttas the word occurs in three major doctrinal contexts. One is in the twelvefold formula of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppada*), where the *sankharas* are the second link in the series. They are said to be conditioned by ignorance and to function as a condition for consciousness. Putting together statements from various suttas, we can see that the *sankharas* are the kammically active volitions responsible for generating rebirth and thus for sustaining the onward movement of samsara, the round of birth and death. In this context *sankhara* is virtually synonymous with kamma, a word to which it is etymologically akin.

A second major domain where the word *sankharas* applies is among the five aggregates. The fourth aggregate is the *sankhara-khandha*, the aggregate of volitional formations. The texts define the *sankhara-khandha* as the six classes of volition (*cha cetanakaya*): volition regarding forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and ideas. Though these *sankharas* correspond closely to those in the formula of dependent origination, the two are not in all respects the same, for the *sankhara-khandha* has a wider range. The aggregate of volitional formations comprises all kinds of volition. It includes not merely those that are kammically potent, but also those that are kammic results and those that are kammically inoperative. In the later Pali literature the *sankhara-khandha* becomes an umbrella category for all the factors of mind except feeling and perception, which are assigned to aggregates of their own. Thus the *sankhara-khandha* comes to include such ethically variable factors as contact, attention, thought, and energy; such wholesome factors as generosity, kindness, and wisdom; and such unwholesome factors as greed, hatred, and delusion. Since all these factors arise in conjunction with volition and participate in volitional activity, the early Buddhist teachers decided that the most fitting place to assign them is the aggregate of volitional formations.

The third major domain in which the word *sankhara* occurs is as a designation for all conditioned things. In this context the word has a passive derivation, denoting whatever is formed by a combination of conditions; whatever is conditioned, constructed, or compounded. In this sense it might be rendered simply "formations," without the qualifying adjective. As bare formations, *sankharas* include all five aggregates, not just the fourth. The term also includes external objects and situations such as mountains, fields, and forests; towns and cities; food and drink; jewelry, cars, and computers.

The fact that *sankharas* can include both active forces and the things produced by them is highly significant and secures for the term its role as the cornerstone of the Buddha's philosophical vision. For what the Buddha emphasizes is that the *sankharas* in the two active senses — the volitional formations operative in dependent origination, and the kammic volitions in the fourth aggregate — construct the *sankharas* in the passive sense: "They construct the conditioned; therefore they are called volitional formations. And what are the conditioned

things they construct? They construct the body, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness; therefore they are called volitional formations" (SN XXII.79).

Though external inanimate things may arise from purely physical causes, the *sankharas* that make up our personal being — the five aggregates — are all products of the kammically active *sankharas* that we engaged in our previous lives. In the present life as well the five aggregates are constantly being maintained, refurbished, and extended by the volitional activity we engage in now, which again becomes a condition for future existence. Thus, the Buddha teaches, it was our own kammically formative *sankharas* that built up our present edifice of personal being, and it is our present formative *sankharas* that are now building up the edifices of personal being we will inhabit in our future lives. These edifices consist of nothing other than *sankharas* as conditioned things, the conditioned formations comprised in the five aggregates.

The most important fact to understand about *sankharas*, as conditioned formations, is that they are all impermanent: "Impermanent, alas, are formations." They are impermanent not only in the sense that in their gross manifestations they will eventually come to an end, but even more pointedly because at the subtle, subliminal level they are constantly undergoing rise and fall, forever coming into being and then, in a split second, breaking up and perishing: "Their very nature is to arise and vanish." For this reason the Buddha declares that all *sankharas* are suffering (*sabbe sankhara dukkha*) — suffering, however, not because they are all actually painful and stressful, but because they are stamped with the mark of transience. "Having arisen they then cease," and because they all cease they cannot provide stable happiness and security.

To win complete release from suffering — not only from experiencing suffering, but from the unsatisfactoriness intrinsic to all conditioned existence — we must gain release from *sankharas*. And what lies beyond the *sankharas* is that which is not constructed, not put together, not compounded. This is Nibbana, accordingly called the Unconditioned — *asankhata* — the opposite of what is *sankhata*, a word which is the passive participle corresponding to *sankhara*. Nibbana is called the Unconditioned precisely because it's a state that is neither itself a *sankhara* nor constructed by *sankharas*; a state described as *visankhara*, "devoid of formations," and as *sabbasankhara-samatha*, "the stilling of all formations."

Thus, when we put the word *sankhara* under our microscope, we see compressed within it the entire worldview of the Dhamma. The active *sankharas* consisting in kammically active volitions perpetually create the *sankhara* of the five aggregates that constitute our being. As long as we continue to identify with the five aggregates (the work of ignorance) and to seek enjoyment in them (the work of craving), we go on spewing out the volitional formations that build up future combinations of aggregates. Just that is the nature of samsara: an unbroken procession of empty but efficient *sankharas* producing still other *sankharas*, riding up in fresh waves with each new birth, swelling to a crest, and then crashing down into old age, illness, and death. Yet on it goes, shrouded in the delusion that we're really in control, sustained by an ever-tantalizing, ever receding hope of final satisfaction.

When, however, we take up the practice of the Dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of *sankharas*. We learn to see the true nature of the *sankharas*, of our own five aggregates: as unstable, conditioned processes rolling on with no one in charge. Thereby we switch off the engine driven by ignorance and craving, and the process of kammic construction, the production of active sankharas, is effectively deconstructed. By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asankhata-dhatu*, the unconditioned element. This is Nibbana, the Deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore our verse concludes: "The subsiding of formations is blissful!"

Chapter 42

Navigating the New Millennium

Although our calculation of time's passage in years and centuries carries no more weight against the vastness of the cosmic process than a feather before a storm, still, being human, it is natural for us to nurture hope on reaching the threshold of a new millennium. Adherents of different religions also turn their thoughts toward the new millennium, and as Buddhists we might briefly ponder the question what the Dhamma can offer the world in the years ahead.

From one angle it could be said that what Buddhism can offer humankind today is exactly what it has been holding out for the past twenty-five centuries: an acute diagnosis of the human condition and a clear path to final liberation from suffering. But while this statement is correct as far as it goes, it is not yet sufficient; for it does not take account of the fact that in any age the aspects of the Dhamma to be emphasized, and the way they are to be expressed, must address the particular problems faced by the people living in that age. The Buddha's teaching acquires its incisive relevance, not merely by the cogency of its broad generalities, but by attuning its formulations to the precise problems that loom so large in the consciousness of the particular period in which it has taken root. Thus for the Dhamma to preserve its vitality and strength, it is not enough merely to repeat hallowed formulas inherited from the past, however true they might be in their own right. Rather, we must focus the lens of the Buddha's teaching on the deep problems faced by human beings today and determine how the teachings can help to resolve those problems as effectively as possible. If what the Buddha taught is "only suffering and the cessation of suffering," then the starting point for any convincing presentation of the way to suffering's end must be the specific forms of suffering characteristic of our time.

In the decades of the twentieth century, two manifestations of suffering have become so prevalent that they seem almost the defining characteristics of the modern era. One is an invidious sense of meaninglessness, a feeling of alienation from life, now becoming almost as common in the more modernized quarters of Asia as in the West. The other, most marked in the Third World, is collective violence. The first problem has its locus in the individual consciousness, the second in the relationships among communities at different levels of social order. If the Dhamma is to benefit humanity in the coming years and decades, it must show us a way out of the abyss of meaninglessness and offer guidelines for reducing the frequency and severity of collective violence.

The sense of meaninglessness as a widespread social phenomenon set in with the rise of modern industrial civilization. As each new breakthrough in natural science dealt a fresh blow to the organic Christian world view that had prevailed during the medieval period, human beings could no longer regard themselves as the pinnacle of creation, the beloved children of an all-loving Father who had created the universe expressly as the stage for our unfolding march toward salvation. Instead, under the influence of the mechanistic sciences, we came to see ourselves as chance products of purely natural causes, born and dying in a universe cold and indifferent to our hopes. Our existence was inexplicable in terms of any objective source of meaning. It did not embody any higher purpose than the brute struggle to survive and propagate our genes before death draws the curtain closed on all our restless strivings.

The loss of meaning was further aggravated by the breakup of traditional forms of social order under the impact of industrial capitalism. The rise of the city and the compulsive work routine of office and factory cut the bonds of social solidarity, so that each individual came to see himself or herself as an isolated entity pitted against others in stark competition for dominance. The individual ego thus became the ultimate center of experience and the sole determinant of value. But it was an isolated ego on whom the other-regarding virtues inculcated by religious ethics, such as generosity and self-sacrifice, no longer had any claims. Altruism and restraint were eclipsed by the new creed of self-indulgence, which gave precedence to wealth, power, and conspicuous consumption as the supreme goals of life.

As Western technology and its offshoot, the consumerist culture, spread to the far corners of the world, the breakdown of meaning and the sense of self-alienation became endemic to many lands, and today this sense of meaninglessness has reached a truly global scale. The culture of narcissism, which exalts the reckless quest for self-aggrandizement, has spread its tentacles everywhere, leaving behind the same debris: agitated minds and

hollow lives. Bent on quick and easy gratification, we pass our lives perpetually shadowed by a fear that all our achievements are worthless, unable to deliver any deep and stable satisfaction. And when this fear reveals itself, the abyss opens up, the realization that we have wasted our lives in the pursuit of empty dreams. Thus the high incidence of mental illness, drug dependence, alcoholism, and suicide, particularly in the more affluent parts of the world.

It is a telling sign that despite the impressive achievements of science and technology, a culture built on mere mastery over external nature is far from successful in meeting the deep demands of the human spirit. For those adrift in the sea of meaninglessness, the Buddha's teaching offers a sense of meaning stemming from a profound spiritual tradition that combines metaphysical depth with psychological astuteness and the highest ethical standards. Without calling for blind faith in dogmatic creeds or speculative postulates, the Buddha points directly to the invariable universal laws that underlie happiness and suffering. He insists that we can discover these laws for ourselves, simply by clear reflection on our own immediate experience, and he offers us methods of practice by which we can gradually dig up the buried roots of suffering and cultivate the causes culminating in the highest happiness.

His appeal is to immediate experience. We can see for ourselves that suffering prevails in a mind driven by greed, hatred, and delusion, and that happiness grows when the mind is suffused by the virtues of generosity, kindness, and understanding. On the basis of this experimental test, which lies within the scope of any thinking person, we can extrapolate and see that for a mind fully liberated from all self-centered defilements and adorned with perfect detachment, love, and wisdom, happiness and peace will become boundless and irreversible. Thus by showing us the way to inner peace and happiness, the Dhamma offers us an outlet from the abyss of meaninglessness, a way to confer on our lives an exalted meaning and purpose.

The second type of suffering that has become so pervasive in our time is social violence, which still wreaks so much misery across the globe. To be sure, communal violence is by no means peculiar to our era nor a product of modern civilization, but has infected human relations from time immemorial. But what has become so disturbing in the present-day world is the eruption of violence between different ethnic communities that in the past had managed to coexist in a relatively stable degree of mutual acceptance. We have witnessed these outbreaks of enmity recently in the Balkans, Russia, Indonesia, Central Africa, northern India, and sadly in our own Sri Lanka. Violence manifests itself, moreover, not only in the conflicts that rage between groups of different ethnic stocks and communal loyalties, but also in economic oppression, in the widening gap between rich and the poor, in the gargantuan arms industries that thrive on violent conflict, in the sexual exploitation of women and children, in the drug trade, and also in the reckless devastation of the environment, by which we risk ripping away the life support systems that sustain our life on earth.

While Buddhism cannot pretend to offer a detailed solution to all the countless forms that violence takes in the present-day world, the values emphasized by the Dhamma show what is required to arrive at any lasting solution. What is necessary for true peace and harmony to prevail among human beings is not the hammering out of a comprehensive treaty by which the various parties to a conflict compromise their hard and volatile demands. What is truly required is a new mode of perception, the ascent to a universal consciousness that transcends the narrow standpoint of egocentric or ethnocentric self-interest. This is a consciousness that regards others as not essentially different from oneself, which detaches itself from the insistent voice of self-interest and rises up to a universal perspective from which the welfare of all appears as important as one's own good.

We can see the germ of this universal perspective in a principle that stands at the base of Buddhist ethics, even more fundamental to its ethical ideals than the Five Precepts or any other formal code of conduct. This is the principle of taking oneself as the criterion for determining how to treat others. When we apply this principle we can understand that just as we each wish to live happily and to be free from suffering, so all other beings wish to live happily and to be free from suffering; just as we are each averse to pain and hardship and want to live in peace, so all others are averse to pain and hardship and want to live in peace. When we have understood this common core of feeling that we share with all other beings, not as a mere idea but as a visceral experience born of deep reflection, we will treat others with the same kindness and care that we would wish them to treat us. And this must apply at a communal level just as much as in our personal relations. We must learn to see other communities as essentially similar to our own, and entitled to the same benefits as we wish for the group to which we belong. Even if we cannot reach any expansive feelings of love and compassion for others, we will at least realize that the moral imperative requires that we treat them with justice and kindness.

Thus the message of the Dhamma to human beings in the next millennium might be briefly summed up in these twin gifts. In the personal domain it gives us a precisely defined path that confers on life a deep sense of purpose, a purpose grounded in the cosmic order but which can be actualized in one's own immediate experience. In the communal dimension of human existence it holds out an ethical guideline to right action which, if diligently applied, can arouse a conscientious commitment to a life of nonviolence. Though it is far too much to expect that these two blessings will become the common heritage of all humanity, we can at least hope that enough people will accept them to make the twenty-first century a brighter and happier century than the one we are about to leave behind.

Chapter 43

Two Styles of Insight Meditation

Today the practice of insight meditation has gained global popularity, yet in achieving this success it has undergone a subtle metamorphosis. Rather than being taught as an integral part of the Buddhist path, it is now often presented as a secular discipline whose fruits pertain more to life within the world than to supramundane release. Many meditators testify to the tangible benefits they have gained from the practice of insight meditation, benefits that range from enhanced job performance and better relationships to deeper calm, more compassion, and greater awareness. However, while such benefits may certainly be worthwhile in their own right, taken by themselves they are not the final goal that the Buddha himself holds up as the end point of his training. That goal, in the terminology of the texts, is the attainment of Nibbana, the destruction of all defilements here and now and deliverance from the beginningless round of rebirths.

Perhaps the most powerful pressure that has shaped the contemporary expression of insight meditation has been the need to transplant the practice into a largely secular environment remote from its traditional matrix of Buddhist faith and doctrine. Given the skeptical climate of our age, it is quite appropriate that newcomers to Dhamma be invited to explore for themselves the potential inherent in the practice. Perhaps the last thing they need is to have the full agenda of Buddhist doctrine thrust upon them from the start.

However, though we may initially take up meditation with an open and explorative mind, at a certain point in our practice we inevitably arrive at a crossroads where we are faced with a choice. Either we can continue the meditation as a purely naturalistic, non-religious discipline, or we can transpose the practice back into its original setting of Buddhist faith and understanding. If we choose the first route, we might still deepen our meditation and reap more abundantly the same benefits we have obtained so far — deeper calm, more equanimity, greater openness, even a kind of penetration of the here and now. Nevertheless, as desirable as these fruits might be in themselves, viewed against the Buddha's word they remain incomplete. For the practice of insight meditation to achieve the full potential ascribed to it by the Buddha, it must be embraced by several other qualities that rivet it to the framework of the teaching.

Foremost among such qualities is the complementary pair of faith and right view. As a factor of the Buddhist path, faith (*saddha*) does not mean blind belief but a willingness to accept on trust certain propositions that we cannot, at our present stage of development, personally verify for ourselves. These propositions concern both the nature of reality and the higher reaches of the path. In the traditional map of the Buddhist training, faith is placed at the beginning, as the prerequisite for the later stages comprised in the triad of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. The canonical texts do not seem to envisage the possibility that a person lacking faith in the tenets specific to the Dhamma could take up the practice of insight meditation and reap positive results. Yet today such a phenomenon has become extremely widespread. It is quite common now for meditators to make their first contact with the Dhamma through intensive insight meditation, and then to use this experience as a touchstone for assessing their relationship to the teaching.

At this juncture, the choice they make divides meditators into two broad camps. One consists of those who focus exclusively on the tangible benefits the practice yields here and now, suspending all concern with what lies beyond the horizons of their own experience. The other consists of those who recognize the practice to flow from a fount of understanding far deeper and broader than their own. To follow this wisdom to its source, such meditators are prepared to subordinate their own familiar assumptions to the disclosures of the teaching and thus embrace the Dhamma as an integral whole.

The fact that insight meditation can be seriously practiced even outside the domain of Buddhist faith raises an interesting question never explicitly posed by the canon and commentaries. If insight meditation can be pursued solely for its immediately visible benefits, then what role does faith play in the development of the path? Certainly, faith as a full acceptance of Buddhist doctrine is not a necessary condition for Buddhist practice. As we have seen, those who do not follow the Dhamma as a path to spiritual deliverance might still accept the Buddhist ethical precepts and practice meditation as a way to inner peace.

Faith must therefore play a different role than that of a simple spur to action, but the exact nature of this

role remains problematic. Perhaps the solution will emerge if we ask what faith actually means in the context of Buddhist practice. It should be clear at once that faith cannot be adequately explained simply as reverence for the Buddha, or as some alloy of devotion, admiration, and gratitude. For while these qualities often exist alongside faith, they may all be present even when faith is absent.

If we examine faith more closely, we would see that besides its emotive ingredients, it also involves a cognitive component. This consists in a readiness to accept the Buddha as the unique discoverer and proclaimer of liberating truth. Seen from this angle, faith necessarily involves a decision. As the word decision implies ("to decide" = to cut off), to place faith in something is to exercise an act of discrimination. Thus Buddhist faith entails, at least implicitly, a rejection of the claims of other spiritual teachers to be bearers of the liberating message on a par with the Buddha himself. As a decision, faith also entails acceptance. It involves a willingness to open oneself to the principles made known by the Enlightened One and adhere to them as trustworthy guides to knowledge and conduct.

It is this decision that separates those who take up the practice of insight meditation as a purely naturalistic discipline from those who practice it within the framework of the Buddhist faith. The former, by suspending any judgment about the picture of the human condition imparted by the Buddha, limit the fruit of the practice to those that are compatible with a secular, naturalistic worldview. The latter, by accepting the Buddha's own disclosure of the human condition, gain access to the goal that the Buddha himself holds up as the final aim of the practice.

The second pillar that supports the practice of insight meditation is the cognitive counterpart of faith, namely, right view (*samma ditthi*). Though the word "view" might suggest that the practitioner actually sees the principles considered to be right, at the outset of the training this is seldom the case. For all but a few exceptionally gifted disciples, right view initially means right belief, the acceptance of principles and doctrines out of confidence in the Buddha's enlightenment. Though Buddhist modernists sometimes claim that the Buddha said that one should believe only what one can verify for oneself, no such statement is found in the Pali canon. What the Buddha does say is that one should not accept his teachings blindly but should inquire into their meaning and attempt to realize their truth for oneself.

Contrary to Buddhist modernism, there are many principles taught by the Buddha as essential to right understanding that we cannot, in our present state, see for ourselves. These are by no means negligible, for they define the framework of the Buddha's entire program of deliverance. Not only do they depict the deeper dimensions of the suffering from which we need release, but they point in the direction where true liberation lies and prescribe the steps that lead to realization of the goal.

These principles include the tenets of both "mundane" and "transcendent" right view. Mundane right view is the type of correct understanding that leads to a fortunate destination within the round of rebirths. It involves an acceptance of the principles of kamma and its fruit; of the distinction between meritorious and evil actions; and of the vast expanse and multiple domains of samsara within which rebirth may occur. Transcendent right view is the view leading to liberation from samsara in its entirety. It entails understanding the Four Noble Truths in their deeper ramifications, as offering not merely a diagnosis of psychological distress but a description of samsaric bondage and a program for final release. It is the transcendent right view that comes at the head of the Noble Eightfold Path and steers the other seven factors toward the cessation of suffering.

While the actual techniques for practicing insight meditation may be identical for those who pursue it as a purely naturalistic discipline and those who adopt it within the framework of Dhamma, the two styles of practice will nevertheless differ profoundly with respect to the results those techniques can yield. When practiced against the background of a naturalistic understanding, insight meditation can bring greater calm, understanding, and equanimity, even experiences of insight. It can purify the mind of the coarser defilements and issue in a tranquil acceptance of life's vicissitudes. For these reasons, this mode of practice should not be disparaged. However, from a deeper point of view, this appropriation of Buddhist meditation remains incomplete. It is still confined to the sphere of conditioned existence, still tied to the cycle of kamma and its fruit.

When, however, insight meditation is sustained from below by deep faith in the Buddha as the perfectly enlightened teacher, and illuminated from above by the wisdom of the teaching, it acquires a new capacity that the other approach lacks. It now functions with the support of dispassion, moving toward ultimate deliverance. It becomes the key to open the doors to the Deathless, the means to gain a freedom that can never be lost. With this, insight meditation transcends the limits of the conditioned, transcends even itself, to arrive at its proper goal: the eradication of all the fetters of existence and release from the beginningless round of birth, aging, and death.

Chapter 44

Does Rebirth Make Sense?

Newcomers to Buddhism are usually impressed by the clarity, directness, and earthy practicality of the Dhamma as embodied in such basic teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the threefold training. These teachings, as clear as day-light, are accessible to any serious seeker looking for a way beyond suffering. When, however, these seekers encounter the doctrine of rebirth, they often balk, convinced it just doesn't make sense. At this point, they suspect that the teaching has swerved off course, tumbling from the grand highway of reason into wistfulness and speculation. Even modernist interpreters of Buddhism seem to have trouble taking the rebirth teaching seriously. Some dismiss it as just a piece of cultural baggage, "ancient Indian metaphysics," that the Buddha retained in deference to the world view of his age. Others interpret it as a metaphor for the change of mental states, with the realms of rebirth seen as symbols for psychological archetypes. A few critics even question the authenticity of the texts on rebirth, arguing that they must be interpolations.

A quick glance at the Pali suttas would show that none of these claims has much substance. The teaching of rebirth crops up almost everywhere in the Canon, and is so closely bound to a host of other doctrines that to remove it would virtually reduce the Dhamma to tatters. Moreover, when the suttas speak about rebirth into the five realms — the hells, the animal world, the spirit realm, the human world, and the heavens — they never hint that these terms are meant symbolically. To the contrary, they even say that rebirth occurs "with the breakup of the body, after death," which clearly implies they intend the idea of rebirth to be taken quite literally.

In this essay I won't be arguing the case for the scientific validity of rebirth. Instead, I wish to show that the idea of rebirth *makes sense*. I will be contending that it "makes sense" in two ways: first, in that it is *intelligible*, having meaning both intrinsically and in relation to the Dhamma as a whole; and second, in that it helps us to *make sense*, to understand our own place in the world. I will try to establish this in relation to three domains of discourse, the ethical, the ontological, and the soteriological. Don't be frightened by the big words: the meaning will become clear as we go along.

First, the teaching of rebirth makes sense in relation to *ethics*. For early Buddhism, the conception of rebirth is an essential plank of its ethical theory, providing an incentive for avoiding evil and doing good. In this context, the doctrine of rebirth is correlated with the principle of kamma, which asserts that all our morally determinate actions, our wholesome and unwholesome deeds, have an inherent power to bring forth fruits that correspond to the moral quality of those deeds. Read together, the twin teachings of rebirth and kamma show that a principle of moral equilibrium obtains between our actions and the felt quality of our lives, such that morally good deeds bring agreeable results, bad deeds disagreeable results.

It is only too obvious that such moral equilibrium cannot be found within the limits of a single life. We can observe, often poignantly, that morally unscrupulous people might enjoy happiness, esteem, and success, while people who lead lives of the highest integrity are bowed down beneath pain and misery. For the principle of moral equilibrium to work, some type of survival beyond the present life is required, for kamma can bring its due retribution only if our individual stream of consciousness does not terminate with death. Two different forms of survival are possible: on the one hand, an eternal afterlife in heaven or hell, on the other a sequence of rebirths. Of these alternatives, the hypothesis of rebirth seems far more compatible with moral justice than an eternal afterlife; for any finite good action, it seems, must eventually exhaust its potency, and no finite bad action, no matter how bad, should warrant eternal damnation.

It may be the case that this insistence on some kind of moral equity is an illusion, an unrealistic demand we superimpose on a universe cold and indifferent to our hopes. There is no logical way to prove the validity of rebirth and kamma. The naturalist might just be right in holding that personal existence comes to an end at death, and with it all prospects for moral justice. Nevertheless, I believe such a thesis flies in the face of one of our deepest moral intuitions, a sense that some kind of moral justice must ultimately prevail. To show that this is so, let us consider two limiting cases of ethically decisive action. As the limiting case of immoral action,

let us take Hitler, who was directly responsible for the dehumanizing deaths of perhaps ten million people. As the limiting case of moral action, let us consider a man who sacrifices his own life to save the lives of total strangers. Now if there is not survival beyond death, both men reap the same ultimate destiny. Before dying, perhaps, Hitler experiences some pangs of despair; the self-sacrificing hero enjoys a few seconds knowing he's performing a noble deed. Then beyond that — nothing, except in others' memories. Both are obliterated, reduced to lifeless flesh and bones.

Now the naturalist might be correct in drawing this conclusion, and in holding that those who believe in survival and retribution are just projecting their own wishes out upon the world. But I think something within us resists consigning both Hitler and our compassionate hero to the same fate. The reason we resist is because we have a deep intuitive sense that a principle of moral justice is at work in the world, regulating the course of events in such a way that our good and bad actions rebound upon ourselves to bring the appropriate fruit. Where the naturalist holds that this intuition amounts to nothing more than a projection of our own ideals out upon the world, I would contend that the very fact that we can conceive a demand for moral justice has a significance that is more than merely psychological. However vaguely, our subjective sense of moral justice reflects an objective reality, a principle of moral equilibrium that is not mere projection but is built into the very bedrock of actuality.

The above considerations are not intended to make belief in rebirth a necessary basis for ethics. The Buddha himself does not try to found ethics on the ideas of kamma and rebirth, but uses a purely naturalistic type of moral reasoning that does not presuppose personal survival or the working of kamma. The gist of his reasoning is simply that we should not mistreat others — by injuring them, stealing their belongings, exploiting them sexually, or deceiving them — because we ourselves are averse to being treated in such ways. Nevertheless, though the Buddha does not *found* ethics on the theory of rebirth, he does make belief in kamma and rebirth a strong inducement to moral behavior. When we recognize that our good and bad actions can rebound upon ourselves, determining our future lives and bringing us happiness or suffering, this gives us a decisive reason to avoid unwholesome conduct and to diligently pursue the good.

The Buddha includes belief in rebirth and kamma in his definition of right view, and their explicit denial in wrong view. It is not that the desire for the fruits of good karma should be one's main motive for leading a moral life, but rather that acceptance of these teachings inspires and reinforces our commitment to ethical ideals. These twin principles open a window to a wider background against which our pursuit of the moral life unfolds. They show us that our present living conditions, our dispositions and aptitudes, our virtues and faults, result from our actions in previous lives. When we realize that our present conditions reflect our kammic past, we will also realize that our present actions are the legacy that we will transmit to our kammic descendants, that is, to ourselves in future lives. The teaching of rebirth thus enables us to face the future with fortitude, dignity, and courage. If we recognize that no matter how debilitating our present conditions might be, no matter how limiting and degrading, we can still redeem ourselves, we will be spurred to exercise our will for the achievement of our future good. By our present actions of body, speech, and mind, we can transform ourselves, and by transforming ourselves, we can surmount all inner and outer obstacles and advance toward the final goal.

The teachings of kamma and rebirth have a still deeper ethical significance than as simple pointers to moral responsibility. They show us not only that our personal lives are shaped by our own kammic past, but also that we live in an ethically meaningful universe. Taken in conjunction, they make the universe a *cosmos*, an orderly, integrated whole, with dimensions of significance that transcend the merely physical. The levels of order that we have access to by direct inspection or scientific investigation do not exhaust all the levels of cosmic order. There is system and pattern, not only in the physical and biological domains, but also in the ethical, and the teachings of kamma and rebirth reveal just what that pattern is. Although this ethical order is invisible to our fleshly eyes and cannot be detected by scientific apparatus, this does not mean it is not real. Beyond the range of normal perception, a moral law holds sway over our deeds and via our deeds over our destiny. It is just the principle of kamma, operating across the sequence of rebirths, that locks our volitional actions into the dynamics of the cosmos, thus making ethics an expression of the cosmos's own intrinsic orderliness. At this point ethics begins to shade into ontology, which we will examine in the next part of this essay.

The teaching of rebirth, taken in conjunction with the doctrine of kamma, implies that we live in a morally ordered universe, one in which our morally determinate actions bring forth fruits that in some way correspond to their own ethical quality. Though the moral law that links our actions with their fruits cannot be demonstrated experimentally in the same way that physical and chemical laws can be, this does not mean it is not real. It means only that, like quarks and quasars, it operates beyond the threshold of sensory perception. Far from being a mere projection of our subjective ideals, the moral law locks our volitional deeds into an all-embracing cosmic order that is perfectly objective in that it functions independently of our personal desires, views, and beliefs. Thus when we submit our behavior to the rule of ethics, we are not simply acting in ways that merit moral approval. By conforming to the principles of ethics we are doing nothing less than aligning ourselves with the Dhamma, the universal law of righteousness and truth which stands at the bedrock of the cosmos.

This brings us to the *ontological* aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth, its implications for understanding the nature of being. Buddhism sees the process of rebirth as integral to the principle of conditionality that

runs through all existence. The sentient universe is regulated by different orders of causation layered in such a way that higher orders of causation can exercise dominion over lower ones. Thus the order of kamma, which governs the process of rebirth, dominates the lower orders of physical and biological causation, bending their energies toward the fulfillment of its own potential. The Buddha does not posit a divine judge who rules over the workings of kamma, rewarding and punishing us for our deeds. The kammic process functions autonomously, without a supervisor or director, entirely through the intrinsic power of volitional action. Interwoven with other orders in the vast, complex web of conditionality, our deeds produce their consequences just as naturally as seeds in a field bring forth their appropriate herbs and flowers.

To understand how kamma can produce its effects across the succession of rebirths we must invert our normal, everyday conception of the relationship between consciousness and matter. Under the influence of materialistic biases we assume that material existence is determinative of consciousness. Because we witness bodies being born into this world and observe how the mind matures in tandem with the body, we tacitly take the body to be the foundation of our existence and mind or consciousness an evolutionary offshoot of blind material processes. Matter wins the honored status of "objective reality," and mind becomes an accidental intruder upon an inherently senseless universe.

From the Buddhist perspective, however, consciousness and the world coexist in a relationship of mutual creation which equally require both terms. Just as there can be no consciousness without a body to serve as its physical support and a world as its sphere of cognition, so there can be no physical organism and no world without some type of consciousness to constitute them as an organism and world. Though temporally neither mind nor matter can be regarded as prior to the other, in terms of practical importance the Buddha says that mind is the forerunner. Mind is the forerunner, not in the sense that it arises before the body or can exist independently of a physical substratum, but in the sense that the body and the world in which we find ourselves reflect our mental activity.

It is mental activity, in the form of volition, that constitutes kamma, and it is our stock of kamma that steers the stream of consciousness from the past life into a new body. Thus the Buddha says: "This body, O monks, is old kamma, to be seen as generated and fashioned by volition, as something to be felt" (SN XI.37). It is not only the body, as a composite whole, that is the product of past kamma, but the sense faculties too (see SN XXV.146). The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body-sense, and mind-base are also fashioned by our past kamma, and thus kamma to some degree shapes and influences all our sensory experience. Since kamma is ultimately explained as volition (*cetana*), this means that the particular body with which we are endowed, with all its distinguishing features and faculties of sense, is rooted in our volitional activities in earlier lives. Precisely how past volition can influence the development of the zygote lies beyond the range of scientific explanation, but if the Buddha's words are to be trusted such an influence must be real.

The channel for the transmission of kammic influence from life to life across the sequence of rebirths is the individual stream of consciousness. Consciousness embraces both phases of our being — that in which we generate fresh kamma and that in which we reap the fruits of old kamma — and thus in the process of rebirth, consciousness bridges the old and new existences. Consciousness is not a single transmigrating entity, a self or soul, but a stream of evanescent acts of consciousness, each of which arises, briefly subsists, and then passes away. This entire stream, however, though made up of evanescent units, is fused into a unified whole by the causal relations obtaining between all the occasions of consciousness in any individual continuum. At a deep level, each occasion of consciousness inherits from its predecessor the entire kammic legacy of that particular stream; in perishing, it in turn passes that content on to its successor, augmented by its own novel contribution. Thus our volitional deeds do not exhaust their full potential in their immediately visible effects. Every volitional deed that we perform, when it passes, leaves behind a subtle imprint stamped upon the onward-flowing stream of consciousness. The deed deposits in the stream of consciousness a seed capable of bearing fruit, of producing a result that matches the ethical quality of the deed.

When we encounter suitable external conditions, the kammic seeds deposited in our mental continuum rise up from their dormant condition and produce their fruits. The most important function performed by kamma is to generate rebirth into an appropriate realm, a realm that provides a field for it to unfold its stored potentials. The bridge between the old existence and the new is, as we said above, the evolving stream of consciousness. It is within this stream of consciousness that the kamma has been created through the exercise of volition; it is this same stream of consciousness, flowing on, that carries the kammic energies into the new existence; and it is again this same stream of consciousness that experiences the fruit. Conceivably, at the deepest level all the individual streams of consciousness are integrated into a single all-embracing matrix, so that, beneath the surface of events, the separate kammic accumulations of all living beings crisscross, overlap, and merge. This hypothesis — though speculative — would help account for the strange coincidences we sometimes meet that prick holes in our assumptions of rational order.

The generative function of kamma in the production of new existence is described by the Buddha in a short but pithy sutta preserved in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN III.76). Venerable Ananda approaches the Master and says, "'Existence, existence' is spoken of, venerable sir. In what way is there existence?" The Buddha replies: "If there were no kamma ripening in the sensory realm, no sense-sphere existence would be discerned. If there where

no kamma ripening in the form realm, no form-sphere existence would be discerned. If there were no kamma ripening in the formless realm, no formless-sphere existence would be discerned. Therefore, Ananda, kamma is the field, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture for beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving to be established in a new realm of existence, either low (sense-sphere), middling (form-sphere), or high (formless-sphere)."

As long as ignorance and craving, the twin roots of the round of rebirths, remain intact in our mental continuum, at the time of death one especially powerful kamma will become ascendant and propel the stream of consciousness to the realm of existence that corresponds to its own "vibrational frequency." When consciousness, as the seed, becomes planted or "established" in that realm it sprouts forth into the rest of the psycho-physical organism, summed up in the expression "name and form" (*nama-rupa*). As the organism matures, it provides the site for other past kammas to gain the opportunity to produce their results. Then, within this new existence, in response to our various kammically induced experiences, we engage in actions that engender fresh kamma with the capacity to generate still another rebirth. Thereby the round of existence keeps turning from one life to the next, as the stream of consciousness, swept along by craving and steered by kamma, assumes successive modes of embodiment.

The ultimate implication of the Buddha's teaching on kamma and rebirth is that human beings are the final masters of their own destiny. Through our unwholesome deeds, rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, we create unwholesome kamma, the generative cause of bad rebirths, of future misery and bondage. Through our wholesome deeds, rooted in generosity, kindness, and wisdom, we beautify our minds and thereby create kamma productive of a happy rebirth. By using wisdom to dig more deeply below the superficial face of things, we can uncover the subtle truths hidden by our preoccupation with appearances. Thereby we can uproot the binding defilements and win the peace of deliverance, the freedom beyond the cycle of kamma and its fruit. This aspect of the Buddhist teaching on rebirth will be explored more fully in the third part of this essay.[1]

[1] As of Summer 2005, the third installment had not yet been published.

License

©1998-2005 Buddhist Publication Society. You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that: (1) you only make such copies, etc. available free of charge and, in the case of reprinting, only in quantities of no more than 50 copies; (2) you clearly indicate that any derivatives of this work (including translations) are derived from this source document; and (3) you include the full text of this license in any copies or derivatives of this work. Otherwise, all rights reserved